

HERA

Humanities in the European Research Area

COVID-19 HERA STATEMENT

The COVID-19 crisis has posed immense challenges not only to healthcare, medicine and science, but to society as a whole as we confront the political, economic, social and cultural effects of the virus. The Humanities have an essential role to play in understanding the impact of the pandemic, not only in the short term but in the future by providing a longer perspective on changes brought about by the crisis, in conjunction with research in the natural, life and social sciences.

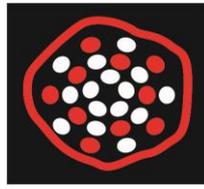
At this transformative moment, HERA wishes to highlight the significance of history, language, narrative, culture, ethics and other domains of Humanities research. We support the initiatives of various agencies and ministries at the national level and we join advocates across Europe and beyond in making the case for Humanities and cross-disciplinary investigations at this time.¹

The experience of the COVID-19 crisis has revealed how much could be learned from previous pandemics – how they spread and were fought, documented, represented and remembered or erased from public memory. This history stretches from Antiquity through the medieval and early modern periods and right up to the present moment. Major episodes in recent times and over the past century include Ebola, swine flu, MERS, SARS, H5N1 Avian Flu, and the Hong Kong H3N2 flu which killed over a million people in 1968–69, as well as the devastating 1918–19 flu. Techniques of isolation and quarantining are in fact ancient responses, predicated not just on medical but on political authority, and studying their limits and successes would teach us much in the current predicament, greatly helping policymakers in planning measures to respond to the next pandemic as we build a more resilient world.

Writing the history of COVID-19 from a Humanities-led research perspective can emphasize the different kinds of political, media, legal and cultural responses, the language and rhetoric of the pandemic (e.g., military metaphors, hate speech, intolerance), the diverse narratives (e.g., political, scientific, cultural, populist, fake news) and will thus enable us to gain a better understanding of the workings and values of our societies.

There are also complex and intertwined ethical and sociocultural issues that must be addressed, ranging from social compliance to concepts of care, the ethics of data gathering and of research more generally, the value of expertise, attitudes to the elderly and those with “underlying conditions”, reconfigurations of public and private space, new methods of communication during the outbreak, and, as it has become obvious in many if not in all countries affected by COVID-19, political decision-making and the processing and presentation of information.

¹<http://www.eassh.eu/c/mission-covid-19-global-problems-need-research-portfolio>;
<https://www.irishhumanities.com/assets/Uploads/IHA-Covid-19-Response-1-May-2020.pdf>;
<https://www.the-guild.eu/news/2020/humanities-in-pandemic-times.html>



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These issues raise questions about how civil rights and civil liberties have been and are being treated during the pandemic. Many issues are at stake, from data gathering to the emergence of new patterns of racism, or the political (mis)use of the current situation.

In the midst of these challenges, the importance of culture has been abundantly clear, as a resource of expression and collective well-being. Digital innovation has taken place in numerous areas of research and practice, including digital approaches to cultural production and access under conditions of lockdown and isolation.

The HERA network lends its full support to these research topics, with the goal of encouraging the dialogue between science and society, and between science and politics, which the COVID-19 crisis so urgently calls for. Representing different research traditions and serving as a voice of all Humanities disciplines, HERA provides a foundation for research that can deepen public discussion and inform the work of policy makers.

The HERA Board