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**Report to the Council<sup>1</sup>**

**2017 ACLS Annual Meeting  
American Council of Learned Societies  
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Good morning, friends, and welcome to the 2017 annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies. It is a telling commentary on this moment that dystopia is back in fashion. A televised adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story of a near-future America under a theocratic government, is streaming on Hulu. George Orwell's novel *1984* is being adapted for the New York stage, where another dystopian drama, Wallace Shawn's *Evening at the Talk House*, recently ran. Sales of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* and Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* are spiking on Amazon. There is a Utopian Studies Society in Europe that has never applied for membership, but how long will it be before ACLS receives an application from the Society for Dystopian Studies?

This current fascination with socio-political darkness may be useful, for the discerning lens of the dystopian imagination reveals what is necessary to forestall such nightmarish outcomes. There are no humanities as we know them in dystopias, no place for the insistent questioning of what is, nor for the potentially subversive vision of what might be. And

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<sup>1</sup> A video of President Yu's report is available on the ACLS website; see [www.acls.org/media](http://www.acls.org/media).

throughout history, the personal, intellectual, and spiritual liberation promised by the study of the humanities has been a threat to authoritarian regimes.

That the humanities seem challenged today is an all-too-familiar theme. We face a number of difficulties, to be sure, but I believe that one of the major reasons that the humanities suffer the benighted arguments of short-sighted politicians and commentators is that the humanities themselves are *challenging*. The humanities have always been integral to the university's role as a knowledge-bearing institution, an incubator of innovation, and an essential preserve of intellectual freedom. They help us understand the cultural heritage that has shaped our civilizations through history as well as what will make life meaningful and coherent tomorrow. The humanities play a critical role within society, culture, education, and individual experience, and that role is *to challenge*. As Louis Menand wrote years ago in an ACLS Occasional Paper: "The academic's job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the questions the public does not want to ask, by investigating the subjects it cannot or will not investigate, by accommodating the voices it fails or refuses to accommodate. Academics need to look to the world to see what kind of teaching and thinking needs to be done, and how they might better organize themselves to do it; but they need to ignore the world's insistence that they reproduce its self-image."<sup>2</sup> As commerce and technology proceed at an ever faster pace, and change the face of the world in the process, the humanities don't just investigate and explain those changes. They are also there to ask: Why this change? Is it good? For whom?

Last night we heard how the humanities demonstrate their value in the public airing of powerfully painful issues. Creating effective public engagement requires ethical commitments. This work is not simple, but it is essential if we are to strengthen the public appreciation of and support for humanistic research and education. I will return to this point later, but let me now underline my appreciation for how the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), led by Stephen Kidd, is building strategic local and regional alliances of academic, cultural, and citizen organizations to demonstrate the vitality of humanistic inquiry. While always valuable, this work is paying extra dividends now that the existence of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is under threat from the executive. The efforts of Steve, his colleagues, and the membership of NHA in recent years have created support for the NEH in both political parties and in both houses of Congress, support that was apparent in the recent passage of the final fiscal year 2017 appropriations bill, which actually contained a modest increase in the

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<sup>2</sup>Louis Menand. *The Marketplace of Ideas*. ACLS Occasional Paper No. 49, American Council of Learned Societies, 2001, [www.acls.org/op/49\\_Marketplace\\_of\\_Ideas.htm](http://www.acls.org/op/49_Marketplace_of_Ideas.htm).

Endowment's appropriation through September. I want to thank all of you who responded to requests from ACLS and from our member societies to make the case for NEH to your legislators. It matters.

As I've pointed out many times at our annual meetings, ACLS is particularly proud of the role our predecessors played in helping to convince Congress to establish the Endowment a little more than 50 years ago. And if we have to make the case for it every 50, 15, or 5 years—or *months*—we will do so.

This morning I assure you that whatever the future course of federal policy, ACLS will persist. And we will grow. We are already a critical component of the humanities infrastructure. As you can read in your agenda books, ACLS awarded more than \$20 million in fellowships and grants this program year, a record outlay, and we plan for the same in the 2017–18 competitions. We are the nation's largest single source of research fellowships in the humanities. As a federation of self-governing, inclusive scholarly societies, we are representative of and responsible to the ideals and dedication of scholars and have earned the trust that allows us to direct attention to key issues concerning the production and transmission of humanistic knowledge in society.

But what we do now is not enough. ACLS will mark its centennial in two years. The uncertainties confronting our domain require us to make no small plans for our second century of service to the academic humanities, higher education, and the worldwide community of scholarship. Our board and staff have worked energetically to articulate a vision for the Council's future endeavors and have charted three directions for that work. The first is to extend the reach of the Council's programs. The second is to strengthen our national fellowship programs, which have been demonstrably successful in catalyzing the creation of knowledge. And the third is to build capacity, not just to administer a larger set of programs but also to analyze their results and enhance their effectiveness by communicating those results to the academic community, policy makers, institutional leaders, and the broader public. Let me elaborate on these ideas:

*First, Extending our work.* We want to extend the reach of ACLS by developing new programs that will broaden the range of our awardees and diversify the excellence ACLS represents. It is precisely because ACLS support for scholars and for the production of scholarship through our fellowship programs is such an important feature of the humanities

landscape (especially as public funding for scholarly research dwindles) that we are concerned that the majority of applications to our programs come from scholars at elite institutions. In eight years of competitions for our central ACLS Fellowships—from 2007–08 to 2014–15—each year more than half of the over 1,000 applicants and nearly three-quarters of the 55–70 awardees hailed from the 108 PhD-granting institutions that the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education designates as “R1: Highest research activity.”

If the humanities are to thrive, they must have a broad base, one that allows for wide access to and participation in the creation of new knowledge through research. Our member learned societies, with their democratic principles of scholarly self-governance and inclusivity, provide both models for enacting and a means of transmitting those vital values. The breadth of our enterprise will help determine the diversity of tomorrow’s humanities professoriate. Scholars working in comprehensive universities and community colleges teach the majority of undergraduate students in the United States, so supporting them has broad implications for the vitality of the humanities in our country.

This is not a zero-sum choice. Many new PhDs from R1 universities will spend the bulk of their careers at teaching-intensive institutions, where resources for faculty research are less robust. Supporting faculty across the entire institutional spectrum of higher education thus helps assure that careers begun with doctoral study at research-intensive institutions maintain engagement with the scholarly enterprise in the longer term.

*Second: Strengthening our fellowships.* The first part of ACLS’s constitutional mission—the advancement of humanistic studies—places scholarship at the core of what we do. And, as you well know, the principal means by which ACLS fulfills this mission is by supporting innovative research through fellowships awarded to scholars across all fields of learning in the humanities and social sciences.

Our program of endowment-funded awards—called simply “ACLS Fellowships”—provides a framework for all our programs. Thanks to the reinvigoration of our fellowship program that began in 1997, we have been able to increase the amount of support awarded by 240 percent, with a higher number of fellowships carrying larger stipends. Still, the growth has not kept pace with the need. Our fellowships are in dispiritingly high demand, and we are forced to turn away many worthy applicants. I am therefore especially pleased to announce that in next year’s competition we will increase this year’s total of 71 endowment-funded fellowships to

78, and we expect further increases in future years. We think it especially important to raise the number of awards so as to keep pace with the growing breadth of research in the humanities. We want the program to be of a scope that can continue to accommodate both new and established fields of study, scholars in large disciplines as well as those representing smaller specializations, and new means of creating and representing knowledge.

*Third: Building capacity.* Our vision includes not just new programs, but also growth in our capacity to carry out a diverse set of initiatives with the rigor for which we are known. ACLS has succeeded by being lean and nimble. We don't want to change that, but we must attend to scale. From 2000 to 2015, our annual expenditures have grown by 200 percent but our staff by only 5 percent.

If we are to get the greatest impact from growing our work, we must also be sure that we maximize the results of expanded and extended programming through, first, careful analysis of the data yielded by our fellowship operations and the activities of our member societies, and, second, timely communication of the perspectives thus gained. We will want to exploit the synergies inherent in ACLS as a nationally networked organization and a federation of diverse learned societies by hosting well-designed convenings among different constituencies in higher education.

*So, how will we do all this?* Where will we find the resources for a larger ACLS? We have been fortunate to have earned the support of generous philanthropic partners, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation prominent among them. In December, the foundation awarded ACLS \$8 million both to advance our ambitious plans and to help attract other foundations, and especially individual donors, to our cause. Of the total, \$4 million is a challenge grant, which we must match at the ratio of 2:1.

The ACLS board has formed a centennial committee to review plans and strategies. I want to thank board member Carl Pforzheimer for agreeing to chair the committee and to bring his considerable experience with fund-raising to its deliberations. Indeed, at the end of 2015, Carl and his wife, Betty, made a major contribution that jump-started our centennial efforts.

I am very pleased to recognize three other generous gifts that will help us meet the Mellon Foundations's challenge. First, our board member Peter Baldwin and his wife, Lisbet Rausing, have made a magnificent commitment through Arcadia Fund that will support a 10

percent increase in the number of awards in our central ACLS Fellowship program, specifically to help us fund scholars from a more diverse array of colleges and universities.

Second, I am delighted to recognize Susan McClary and her husband, Robert Walser, for helping us to initiate what we expect will be a significant planned giving program at ACLS, the 1919 Society. Their endowment gift, which is partly a bequest and partly an outright contribution, will establish the McClary-Walser Fellowship in Music Studies, with the first fellow to be named next year. We hope that their generous commitment, which represents the first seven-figure gift and bequest from individual donors in ACLS's history, will serve as an example to many others.

I've known Susan since the time we were both assistant professors at the University of Minnesota, and I had the privilege of hiring both of them at the University of California, Los Angeles during my first year as dean of humanities. The next year Susan was named a MacArthur Fellow. The three of us conspired over the subsequent decade to build a truly stellar program in musicology. Now teaching at Case Western Reserve University, Susan and Rob are longtime members of the ACLS community. Many of you know that Susan served on the board for 10 years, including a term as chair from 2003 to 2006. Rob was an ACLS Fellowship awardee, though he took an NEH grant instead because at that time the stipend was higher!

And third, just yesterday I was thrilled to receive from Lea Wakeman a pledge that will transform the Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr. Fund, established 10 years ago, into a permanently endowed fellowship in Fred's name. A distinguished scholar of Chinese history, Fred was the Haas Professor of Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught for 41 years; he also served as president of the Social Science Research Council and president of the American Historical Association. Instrumental in the establishment of scholarly exchange with the People's Republic of China, he was a member of ACLS China committees and an ACLS fellow himself. It has been a delight to brainstorm with Lea, Fred's widow, on how to make this happen and to share with her my very fond memories of Fred's friendship. We are united in the joy that we expect to name our first official Wakeman fellow next year.

We expect that the commemoration of our centennial, the Mellon Foundation challenge, and the plans we have laid out will encourage more friends to invest in the humanities through ACLS. Those of you with experience in fund-raising know that it is a team sport, and we have added strength to our team, which until last fall did not include any professionals in the field.

Last September, Kathy Heins joined ACLS as our first director of philanthropy. With her help and that of all our colleagues, I expect that we will be able to recognize more generosity in the coming years.

Before concluding this brief report, let me return to the role of the humanities today. This year, 2017, marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of a collection of essays edited by Alvin Kernan entitled *What's Happened to the Humanities?* That volume was intended to lower the heat of that moment's culture wars, when the growth of scholarly studies of the dynamics of gender, race, and ethnicity had discomfited more than a few within the academy. Are such efforts distractions from the humanities' central task of interpreting human meaning-making? Should there be any lingering doubts on this question, I would note just how much these dynamics profoundly shaped and propelled last year's presidential contest. The answer to the question of "What's Happened to the Humanities?" is that they have grown in interpretive strength and scope. I wish we could offer the same answer to the question of what's happened to American politics.

The humanities challenge society to value knowledge itself, as well as the rigor and discipline required for its production. That challenge includes the demand for evidence, reason, and explicit criteria, rather than mere assertion, for the evaluation of claims. Colleges and universities will play a special role in affirming these values. Next year at Northwestern University, for example, the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities will begin a year-long series of conversations around the concept of "truth." The series is an opportunity to consider both the current political climate and the recent history of humanities scholarship, which over the past 50 years has been the site, as we all know, of trenchant critiques of the concept. As Adrian Randolph, dean of Northwestern, noted at our recent meeting of the ACLS Research University Consortium, the humanities are powerfully equipped for a discussion about what does and should constitute evidence today.

Everything we value about the humanities—the knowledge they convey, the insights they provoke, the understandings they sustain—derives ultimately from the hard work of skilled and dedicated researchers. They are an essential element of our intellectual and cultural infrastructure, and their capacities are ever more necessary in an interconnected world where individuals and cultures brush up against each other, interact, and are transformed. Humanistic expertise is crucial to addressing the numerous social, cultural, and ethical questions raised in a host of other fields: public health, environmental policy, bioengineering, foreign affairs, national

defense—the list goes on. Without the knowledge provided by the humanities, we cannot understand where we have come from, where we are, or where we are going. The humanities help us recognize our system of values, the values with which we navigate the confusion we call life.

We value the public humanities precisely because there is no “private humanities.” No one who engages with the humanities is an island. Vibrant humanities live only in the exposition of ideas, in the communication of understanding, and in collective interpretation. Even the solitary reader—in the library, in her study, or on her iPad, is in communion, and not just with the author of the text but also with the community of thought that shaped the author’s writing and the contemporary community of thought she came from and will return to.

It is precisely because scholarship is a communal act that learned societies were created, and it is why they are so essential to the higher education landscape today. As I have noted before, learned societies were social networks before the term was invented. Many of our current programs seek to promote new networks and communities in humanities scholarship: Our Digital Extension Grant program, which just this week announced its second cohort of funded projects, is one such initiative. The program is designed to extend opportunities in digital humanities research to a greater number of scholars by bringing new participants to established projects. As always, we are grateful for the Mellon Foundation’s continued support of our efforts to speed the digital transformation of humanities scholarship.

When ACLS was founded in 1919, the challenge facing the humanities was to secure a place in the research culture that had emerged only recently in US higher education. Over its nearly 100 years of existence, ACLS has served as a catalyst for new developments in the scholarly humanities, inaugurating fields of study (such as musicology, African American studies, and Chinese and other area studies), and galvanizing support for new methodologies, such as collaborative and digital scholarship. Today, with increased stratification and inequality within higher education, the challenge is to assure that the values and cultural power of the humanities remain a common wealth available to many and that their pursuit not become a marginalized enterprise consigned to the custody and safe-keeping of a few elite institutions. With your help, we are happy to accept that challenge.

Thank you.