

A New Minerva Center for the Humanities at Tel Aviv University

Professor Rivka Feldhay from the Cohn Institute at Tel Aviv University, together with her colleagues Professor Adi Ophir from the Cohn Institute and Dr. Raef Zreik from the Faculty of Law, Haifa University, have won the competition for a new Minerva Center for the Humanities. With an endowment of 4 Million Euro from the Minerva Foundation to be matched by an equivalent sum from Tel Aviv University, the new center will be a basis for three ambitious research programs in the humanities.

The guiding idea behind the three projects - stemming from research of the humanities and the social sciences in the last century - is that there is no culture today that has not grown out of encounters, cross-fertilization and dialogue with other cultures, and that the best cultural products are the fruits of such encounters. The establishment of a Humanities Center in Tel Aviv University that will devote itself to studying transmission, translation and transplantation of knowledge across cultures is likely to create the atmosphere and intellectual tools for wisely breaking through the boundaries between cultures and societies embedded in mutual ignorance and negative collective images. The center will be engaged not only in understanding but also in activating knowledge, in transmitting and diffusing it beyond the local and the regional. At the same time we will be aware of our special responsibility for the way knowledge is imported and re-embedded in our society. The Center will attempt to transcend the borders of the academic world and have an impact on the broad public and decision-makers, by facilitating the much needed inter-cultural dialogues in this troubled area of the world.

Professor Feldhay will lead a research group on migration of knowledge. The group will examine the intellectual legacy of early modernity in Europe and the Middle East as the product of the movements of large groups of scholars with their manuscripts, books, linguistic expertise and bodies of knowledge along different trajectories of migration.

Professor Ophir will continue and expand the work of an existing research group that studies key concepts in political thought in the framework of "Encyclopedia in the making." Guided by the old philosophical question "what is X" (e.g., what is a state, power, violence, family, class), the group will initiate the writing of original essays on key traditional and novel even "bastard" concepts.

Dr Zreik will lead a comparative research on forms of political communities, that takes its inspiration from Moslem and Jewish traditions as well as from contemporary critical philosophy. By broadening the perspectives fixed in recent debates between liberalism and its contemporary Western critics, this team will enrich our repertoire of available options for living together within a political community.

Each team will consist of 10-12 members, at least half of them doctoral and postdoctoral students, and the others junior and senior scholars, coming from a variety of disciplinary and cultural backgrounds. Students and scholars will apply for scholarships and positions at the Center on the basis of individual research proposals that will fit the conceptual framework and the thematic focus of one of the three teams. Each team will benefit from the expertise of visiting scholars who will join the Center for short periods to participate in seminars, meet faculty and students, and give public lectures. Each team will conduct its own seminars and other activities and take part in a series of public lectures and annual conferences. The entire faculty of the Center will meet in monthly general seminars to discuss their shared theoretical and methodological interests. The work of the

three teams will be published in various formats, but mostly in a special electronic website run by the Minerva Center.

The decline in status and public support of the humanities is not unique to Israel, but in this country where higher education has always relied on public funding, the humanities have been particularly damaged by the recent withdrawal of the state from its traditional role as the main source of funding for academic institutions. While the passion for knowledge and research is as great as ever, many talented students and young scholars are forced to leave Israel or to abandon their profession and vocation. The Center will offer an important venue for alleviating, at least partially, this lamentable situation.

Principles and Framework

With this in mind, we envision a Center for the Humanities that will be committed to the following principles:

1. integration of research and teaching through teamwork where teams are dedicated to specific research projects;
2. pursuit of knowledge that is pertinent for understanding the world, the times, and the region in which we live;
3. cultivation of the next generation of scholars by supporting them with scholarships and junior positions as team leaders' assistants, and introducing them to the relevant international networks of scholars;
4. creation of an arena of exchange for scholars and students from different, sometimes conflicting cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts, from different strands of Israeli society, and – as much as possible – from different parts of the Middle East (not as a reflection of political tolerance but rather as a necessary condition for production of knowledge and the work of understanding);
5. encouraging the use of Arabic (alongside Hebrew and English) as a language of research, discussion, and publication.
6. looking at the Middle East not simply as an object of knowledge but as the place and context of its production and part of the condition for its operation, a juncture and trading zone (whose boundaries should be constantly questioned) where different strands of knowledge and ideas have interacted.