

Dear Professor Peters,
Dear colleagues,
Dear guests,

George Sarton founded the journal *Isis* – his “second child” – more than a century ago. The journal’s subtitle specified its remit: *Revue consacrée à l’histoire de la science, publiée par George Sarton, D.S.C.* In the programmatic opening essay of *Isis*’ first issue, Sarton argued that intellectual energy needed to be invested in the history of science in order to counterbalance the growing specialization in science or what he called the “division du travail scientifique” (Sarton, 1913, p. 4, p. 12). In his view, the history of science had to provide a *trait d’union* between the increasing number of specializations. It had to shed light on the various interactions and interdependences, on the many commonalities, on “all the bonds that unite the different sciences” (Sarton, 1913, p. 9, p. 12). For Sarton, it was necessary to counteract the increasing specialization and differentiation within the field of science in order to contribute to a “new humanism”.

As we know, the trend towards increasing specialization did not come to an end in the last hundred years or so. Although the academic world has been confronted with a variety of crises in this period, it has altogether been growing considerably. It is this expansion of the population of academics, which has continued to fuel differentiation and specialization processes. Increasing numbers of scholars produced increasing amounts of research. Specialization grew as a means of dealing with this flood of material. At present, it is for anyone impossible to obtain a good overview of scientific developments in more than a few related specializations. One might say that the field of science has lost its human scale. In most cases, specializations have also begun to lose touch with their past. A world in which so much research appears so fast inevitably tends to forget older work. Forgetting one’s own history is a way of dealing with information overload. Sarton’s hopes and prospects have not come true, they have not been realized. In fact, the field of history of science, which he helped to establish, developed itself into a quite isolated specialization, characterized by a relatively strong internal orientation, but comparatively weak ties to a few related specializations (for an analysis of citation networks, see Vandermoere & Vanderstraeten, 2012).

Our intention is not to sketch a grim picture of the world of science. For many, specialization has led to swift progress within the world of science. For Sarton, too, only disciplined inquiry could allow us to get closer and closer to the truth. But, with Sarton, it might also be said that the trend towards increasing specialization also has side-effects, it also goes at costs. Some themes or questions cannot be confined to a single discipline; the lack of knowledge of one’s own knowledge traditions leads to a variety of myopia diseases, and so on. At the same time, however, we think that many agree that it is now both important and urgent to keep an eye out to transdisciplinary developments, to invest in the development of broader points of view, to improve our capacity for learning from the advances made in other, neighbouring fields of study.

John Peters, who currently is the María Rosa Menocal Professor of English and of Film & Media Studies at Yale University in the United States, is often identified as a media historian and/or as a social theorist. But, however useful as they are, these disciplinary labels do not do full justice to his broad range of scholarly interests and to the transdisciplinary relevance of his contributions (e.g., Peters, 1999, 2005, 2015). Professor Peters can best be described as a true generalist. He provides us with one of the best contemporary interpretations of Sarton’s *trait d’union* between different specializations.

Building upon a broad historical and strong philosophical background, Professor Peters has been one of the first and still is one of the most influential researchers who critically analyses our human ability to communicate with others. In his noted publications, John has particularly analysed how various new communication technologies change the society we live in. He has commented on the invention of printing, the diffusion of the mass media, the rapid breakthrough of the digital era.

Already in the nineteenth century, for example, new technologies made the processing of information much easier. The transport of information became decoupled from the transport of goods. “Before the introduction of the telegraph, information travelled as did any other traded commodity. It moved along with the cargo, and though not usually bulky, its speed was limited to that of the fastest mode of travel of the day” (Lew & Cater, 2006, p. 147). In the second half of the twentieth century, of course, it became once again much easier to convey information very speedily. The computer technology we are now familiar with has thoroughly changed the way we interact and communicate with one another. But these different technologies do not just make interaction and communication easier, they also change the basic structures of the society we live in (De Keyser & Raeymaeckers, 2012). As we see it, much of Professor Peters’ work is a critical, though not a pessimistic analysis of crucial social consequences of the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies.

On this basis, Professor Peters’ work shows the need to revisit our conceptual systems. Most of the so-called classical theories in the social and behavioural sciences emerged in an industrial age. Our classical theories, with their emphasis on power or action, are germane to industrial society. They mainly focus upon processes of producing and trading goods or resources (commodities). What Professor Peters’ historically and philosophically informed analyses make clear is that we need theories and concepts that reflect a different social reality. We need theories and concepts adequate to the emerging information society, to the new forms of communication that are possible. We read Professor Peters’ work as a critical commentary both on contemporary society and on contemporary social theory. But it also is a commentary inspired by what George Sarton called the “new humanism” (Sarton, 1988).

Let us conclude. We should first say that this ceremony has been postponed; it originally was planned to take place during the academic year 2016/2017. But we are really pleased that we are able to award today – finally – the George Sarton Medal to John Peters. If we are well informed, George Sarton was not unknown to John Peters. Although John was born two years after George Sarton had passed away, John’s father was a colleague of Sarton at Harvard University. It is not difficult to imagine that certain interests of Sarton have been passed over to the new generations (Isaac, 2012). We believe that George Sarton himself would have been proud to see that we are able to award today the medal named after him to John Durham Peters.

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