Practicing Humanities in Public: Exploring Experts and Expertise

Sophie Gonick and Michael Beckerman
11AM-1PM via zoom

Office Hours: By Appointment

Brief Course Description:

What is expertise? How does it show up in the public sphere? What is its relation to the humanities? In this course we will critically interrogate the idea of the expert; ask questions about just what the humanities is, and try to understand what humanistic knowledge can add to our pressing contemporary debates. We will think about how humanistic knowledge is employed in the public sphere, how experts are chosen and what happens to them once they are identified as experts.

We will pay attention to the fora and institutions that buttress humanistic expertise, and discuss their contradictions and limitations. Through case studies, theoretical readings, and ongoing debates, we will examine how expertise shapes the world. We will also think about what it means to practice humanities within the public, and the places outside the academy that draw sustenance from humanistic practice. We will consider the role of the humanities in enhancing understanding of issues of illness and the pandemic, racial justice and social protest, and polarized politics. Throughout, we will be in conversation with timely questions that frame politics, culture, and society, from Black Lives Matter to philanthropic giving to the rise of extremist groups.

Course Requirements

Weekly reading, short written assignments throughout the semester, and a final paper to be determined in consultation with the professors.

Feb 2: Course Introduction; Opening Discussion

What is expertise? Who is an expert? What is “the Humanities?”

Feb 9: Expertise and the Public


The Violence of Urban Vacancy
Treating Epidemics in a Nazi Ghetto - Los Angeles Review of Books

Opinion | Facebook and the Surveillance Society: The Other Coup

Feb. 16: Identifying Experts

Special Guest: Emily Greenhouse, Co-Editor in Chief of the New York Review of Books

Assignment: Pick at least recent issues of the New York Review of Books and come to class ready to discuss issues of style, tone, approach, subject matter and, broadly speaking, value.

ALSO: Identify an “expert.” What makes him/her/them an expert? What is their expertise? What criteria do you evaluate their work? What role do such things as trust and belief play in the process?

Feb. 23: The Public Intellectual in Time of Crisis: Timothy Snyder, A Case Study

Reviews of Bloodlands:
Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin
Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin by Timothy Snyder – review
Timothy Snyder's Lies

“What Ails America,” NYRB, Sept. 3, 2020

https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/09/03/what-ails-america/

Historian Of Fascism Timothy Snyder Warns Of Trump's Damage To Democracy | Andrea Mitchell | MSNBC

BBC 4 “Ways to Change the World”
Series 6, Episode 21: Timothy Snyder – Channel 4 News

March 2: Experts and their Institutions - The University

Special Guest: Prof. Carolyn Dinshaw, Dean of the Humanities, NYU

Assignment: Write an essay on how your research and/or course of study can help us to understand some public problem, issue or ongoing question.

March 9: **Experts and their Institutions - The Foundation and the Curator**

**The Family That Built an Empire of Pain**

**The Whitney Museum’s Latest Controversy Might Be Its Messiest Yet**

**Whitney Cancels Show That Included Works Bought at Fund-Raisers**

Pick either a foundation or a museum and write an essay about the way notions of expertise work in that particular world.

March 16: **Pandemics, Expertise, and the Humanities**


March 23: **Racial Justice, Protest, and Humanistic Knowledge**

*Special Guest: Kazembe Balagun, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*


**Diversity & Inclusion A Lesson on Critical Race Theory**

**The Equity-Diversity-Inclusion Industrial Complex Gets a Makeover**

**Insights on Diversity and Inclusion**
March 30: **Humanists Writing about Politics**

*Special Guest: Becquer Seguin, The Johns Hopkins University*

[https://www.thenation.com/article/world/spain-antifa-civil-war/](https://www.thenation.com/article/world/spain-antifa-civil-war/)


April 6: **Trumpism, Extremism, etc.**


*The Uneasy Afterlife of “A Confederacy of Dunces”*

April 13: **Technology, Work, and the Humanities**

**Timnit Gebru** was critical of Google's approach to ethical AI  

**Opinion: Timnit Gebru’s Exit From Google Exposes a Crisis in AI**  

**Plato and Proust can't save Silicon Valley**  

**Liberal Arts Majors Are the Future of the Tech Industry**  

Broussard, Meredith. *Artificial Unintelligence*.

April 20: **Gender and Expertise**

*Special Guest: Melissa Fisher*


April 27: *The Critic and the Arts*

Special Guest, Alex Ross, Music Critic, *The New Yorker*

Excerpts from *The Rest is Noise* and *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, and the blog *The Rest is Noise*

What kind of “humanities” is “the arts”

May 4: *Final presentations*