Theories and Methodologies

Developing Humanities Perspectives across Disciplines

ERIC TOUYA DE MARENNE

What role can public humanities play in teaching and research in other fields? How might such cross-disciplinary initiatives contribute to the creation of a more democratic world? Recent scholarship has highlighted how the public humanities engage "with audiences outside the academy [against] oppressive systems," supporting communities and decentering traditional modes of knowledge and the university as the sole site of expertise (Bartel and Castillo 12). But how can faculty members work within university spaces primarily dedicated to preprofessional training to prepare students to be active agents of the humanities in the world?

I consider here the value of the humanities in cultivating civic- and community-mindedness in students—that is, in preparing them to take humanistic inquiry into their future careers—drawing on my experience teaching business in the francophone world. The work I describe here empowers students to think in terms of community engagement; they learn through case studies and assignments how the humanities can speak to publics in support of justice. In this way, the course contributes to a humanistic orientation and a sense of public engagement among students who are not majoring in a humanities discipline and whose education may be defined largely in economic terms.

For decades, economic considerations have been at the center of life-and-death decisions regarding the future of humanities programs. Academics such as Derek Bok and Andrew Delbanco have criticized the trend toward the marketization of the university. Humanities programs are peremptorily threatened with amputation, if not extinction, and are "expected to prostrate themselves before economic rationales in their struggles for survival" (Clover 107).

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Henry Giroux has argued that the quest for profits and market-driven forces in academic curricula endanger the social contract between people and their leaders, run oppositely to the common good, and reduce "the obligations of citizenship to the act of consuming" (51). According to Giroux, the prevailing educational system inclines individuals toward careerism and consumerism as the only horizon of existence and toward the abandonment of its original humanistic core values.

Citing economic rationales, policymakers have cut budgets allocated to higher education in such a way that institutional centers of gravity have moved further away from language, art, and literary studies, and this academic reorientation has led to a continued decrease in public funding. During the recent pandemic, the shift toward STEM and business and away from the humanities accelerated. While economic considerations are crucial in envisioning the future of liberal arts disciplines, faculty members and students in the humanities often have no say in the matter. Situating my analysis in relation to interdisciplinary theories of community-engaged scholarship, I aim to contest the institutional prioritization of and budgeting default to STEM over the humanities by considering the value of the humanities for students' careers within and beyond the university.

Francophone Women and Economics: Public Humanities Case Studies

My approach to preparing students to be public agents of the humanities entails developing case studies for teaching economics and culture in French-speaking Africa. The course I teach is based on the Lead with Languages campaign that was launched in 2017 by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to encourage people in the United States to learn languages other than English. According to Villa Albertine, the cultural institute of the French embassy in the United States, the rationale for ACTLF's campaign is economic: "The first argument put forward is economic: without a multilingual workforce, the United States would lose momentum in a global economy" ("French").

At Clemson University, I transformed a business course offered in the French curriculum to focus entirely on the French-speaking world outside of France. In particular, I explore issues pertaining to gender and economics in Maghrebi and sub-Saharan countries. Using France 24 television news segments, I created two humanities-focused case studies, examining two companies—Femme Auto and Taxi Sister—founded and managed by women in Dakar, Senegal.[1] The course challenges the notion that the essential purpose of language study is to enhance competitiveness and "revitalize the American productivity engine" (Clover 107). A project I assign responds to the lack of consideration given to humanistic inquiry in conventional economics courses. Through feminist and postcolonial approaches, I analyze the topic in broader and transformative terms, with the goal of cultivating a civic- and community-minded approach to social issues.

Femme Auto is the first female-owned garage in Senegal, a country where gender norms are being defied while at the same time many women are still denied access to the labor market. Created by Ndeye Coumba Mboup, the shop has existed since 2006 and employs around ten mechanics, half of whom are women. Femme Auto works on the maintenance of various companies' and institutions' car fleets in a sector that is stubbornly androcentric. Mboup's aim is to break boundaries, open up the realm of possibilities for women, and show the world that a woman mechanic can repair cars too: "Dès le départ, j'ai voulu un garage cent pour cent féminin pour montrer au monde entier que c'est un métier qui peut être exercé par une femme aussi bien qu'un homme" ("From the start, I wanted a garage one hundred percent staffed by women to show the entire world that it is a job for a woman as much as a man"; "Sénégal"; my trans.).

What distinguishes this case study from a traditional business one is that it involves ethnography and narrative, incorporating decidedly humanistic approaches to economic questions. The students are immersed in the culture of the protagonist. They discover, from a humanistic perspective, the

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challenges faced by a woman entrepreneur in Senegal, and, from a social practice approach, they reevaluate their own beliefs, values, and assumptions and enhance their capacity to think independently.

Mboup explains that she repeatedly asked for but never received assistance from her government or local authorities. So she opened her garage with her own savings in the suburbs of Dakar. Since few schools grant diplomas for women in the profession, she has not yet reached her objective of creating an exclusively female-operated business. She has succeeded, however, in initiating a system of gender parity in which women can also be supervisors. Referring to herself, she explains that "la patronne veut que son garage soit un havre de tolérance dans lequel les deux sexes apprennent à travailler dans le respect mutuel" ("The boss wants her garage to be a haven of tolerance in which the two sexes learn to work with mutual respect"; my trans.).

In the course we discuss how, through her testimony, Mboup makes visible marginalized communities of West African women. We explore Mboup's experience through the work of postcolonial and transnational feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty. From this perspective, Mboup inspires a humanistic approach that "argues persuasively for the need to rethink patriarchies and hegemonic masculinities in relation to present-day globalization and nationalisms, and . . . retheorize the gendered aspects of the refigured relations of the state, the market, and civil society" (Mohanty 245). Articulating a more inclusive politics, she "opens up the space for demystifying capitalism and for envisioning transborder social and economic justice" (249). The gender parity system she establishes challenges the hypothetical *homo economicus* that is mainly interested in the accumulation of wealth and the maximization of profit, modeling instead, from a humanistic perspective, *homo reciprocans*, which privileges cooperation.

This case study encourages students to bring lenses from the humanities to their understanding of economics. Through her testimony, Mboup provides a counternarrative to mainstream economic thought. Confronted by prejudice and faced with models that are biased toward the masculine, she participates in the creation of a community that is economically more gender-inclusive. The students gain a broader understanding of what it means to be a woman in Senegal. They learn about the inequalities women experience globally. They examine how socioeconomic discourses, theories, norms, and values are constructed and how they inevitably inform Western beliefs and policies. That is, they understand Mboup's experience not solely through economic models but also through intersectional feminism. My goal is to prepare students to take insights and perspectives from humanistic inquiry, including considerations of class, gender, and labor, into the world, and particularly into their careers.

The second case study features a female taxi driver who works with Taxi Sister, a company sponsored by the Senegalese Direction de l'Entrepreneuriat Féminin (Department of Women's Entrepreneurship) and who is confronted with discrimination and ostracization. One of fifteen female taxi drivers in Dakar out of a total of fifteen thousand, Mabelle Alssafa Gueye attests to the verbal abuse to which she is subjected, but she stresses at the same time the importance of not letting sexism and patriarchal values dictate what women can or cannot do in their careers. As the Taxi Sister segment shows, the Department of Women's Entrepreneurship has taken steps to combat stereotypes and defend women's rights. According to Marème Cisse Thiam, the director of the department at the time of the video, several initiatives, including strategies of development and information sessions, were launched to raise awareness among the population so that female taxi drivers may be respected ("Sénégal").

As they discuss the video segments featuring Femme Auto and Taxi Sister, students develop skills and knowledge as critical thinkers and potential engaged citizens that they will bring with them from the university into the global community. Using *YouTube*, they also come to recognize that, as Roopika Risam has argued, "the internet is not a space that is apolitical or immune to the vicissitudes of capitalism" and to envision the importance

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of creating "new tools and methods with epistemological and ontological roots beyond the Global North" (23, 25). The case studies foster students' ability to critically reenvision socioeconomics and broaden their awareness of social inequality in French-speaking countries and worldwide.

Students deepen their understanding of what it means to be a woman in the labor force. They learn about the prejudices and inequalities women experience daily. Feminist economists like Julie Nelson, Amartya Sen, and Marylin Waring challenge the notion that economics is a positive science, contending that it is influenced by various ideological, cultural, and social factors. The case studies allow students to examine how socioeconomic discourses are constructed in a male-dominated world.

I seek to demystify and deconstruct the discourses of the economists most often studied in university courses, whose models are often purportedly grounded in mathematical reasoning. Bringing in lenses from the humanities integrates questions of class and gender, cultivating civic-mindedness and a community orientation. The case studies are positively disruptive, helping students experience a key aspect of public humanities within the classroom: the creation of "counter-publics that challenge hierarchies of knowledge and power" (Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 10–11). With these insights, students then participate in the creation of a public humanities project. To apply and deepen what they have learned, each student conducts and records an online interview with a woman entrepreneur from a French-speaking country about her experience and issues pertaining to class and gender inequality. Videos of the interviews are then made accessible and discussed in forums with other students and faculty members in the program during extracurricular events, enriching students' college experience outside the classroom.

The "Public" in Public Humanities

In the introduction to their recent *Routledge Companion to Public Humanities*, Daniel Fisher-Livne and Michelle May-Curry raise the following questions, which guide my approach to the subject: "Why engage in public humanities scholarship? Who constitutes the public in a public humanities initiative? . . . Where and in what spaces do public humanities projects take place?" (9). I examine these questions by considering the current economic rationales used in universities and governmental policies that increase inequalities and threaten the future of democracy (see, e.g., Kuttner).

Matthew Frye Jacobson provides a compelling response by arguing that the public humanities are necessary for "rededicating the American University as a true community resource whose public facing work engenders democratic, civically minded, creative, and just mutual engagements among a broad range of constituencies" (168–69). The pedagogical approach I describe here has a similar aim. It has become urgent for scholars and researchers to respond to the threat posed by the erosion of the very idea of collective social objectives and a growing epistemic divide: "Too many individuals are living in isolated despair while civic structures have become markedly less democratic" (169). According to Frye Jacobson, the purpose of the public humanities, in this context, is to "re-narrate the basis of our collectivity," "reset the terms of inclusion and civic engagement," provide transformative experiences to students, and "articulate a democratic ideal that has yet to be accomplished" (171).

Regarding the second question ("Who constitutes the public in a public humanities initiative?"), I agree with Susan Smulyan that the best public humanities programs bridge audiences and "fill the divide between the academy and the public" (2), given that public humanities happen between professors and students and between campuses and communities, both within and beyond the university. My critical intervention at Clemson reexamines the dichotomies campuses/communities and academy/public and demonstrates how the work within our classrooms is integral to preparing students for engaging with other communities, both in their interview project and in the ways they bring humanistic inquiry into the world beyond college.

I understand the classroom as a pathway for engagement that challenges students' epistemological

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assumptions. The space I envision here breaks down barriers between the knowledge a college education provides and diverse communities' socioeconomic realities. The aim of the public humanities in the course is to transform the imaginary space students inhabit—to broaden their sense of community and offer them access to new ways of thinking.

The Purpose of Education

Shifting his attention from theory to praxis, Jacques Derrida contends in one of his last published talks that "the university should remain the ultimate place of critical resistance in which nothing is beyond question" (13). I have suggested that an essential part of the public humanities is integrating humanistic inquiry in other disciplines, like economics, as a way of preparing students to bring the insights of the humanities to their careers and lives. In outlining a vision for public humanities in the classroom, my goal is to make possible a critical pedagogy through which students and faculty members may respond to the need for praxis and the demands of socioeconomic justice and civic engagement. The kind of public humanities work that I reflect on here is envisioned as an essential method or pathway that inspires and transforms scholars and students and gives meaning to their lives, making them think about how to construct a better world for themselves and others.

Jean-François Lyotard's concept of "libidinal economy" constitutes another path by which students can explore economics with a humanities-driven approach. His work reveals how unconscious forces under the guise of rationality determine economic policies. For Lyotard, libidinal energy constitutes a main driving force of any theoretical fiction and the foundation of all economic systems, rationalizations, and justifications. This notion sheds light on the shortcomings and biases of economic rationales that promote growth at all costs and exacerbate inequality. Education should not be organized in the service of economic activity or exist at the mercy of financial well-being. The public humanities should play a greater role in countering this trend by bringing humanities perspectives into unlikely places to cultivate certain habits of mind grounded in a humanistic approach.

While the humanities are continually scrutinized and called upon to justify their value to the public, the core purposes of a field like economics are rarely questioned. Exploring connections between the classroom and the community, in conjunction with humanities-based reflection on issues of race, gender, and class, helps students to understand the complexity and diversity of socioeconomic realities from a non-Western perspective. They learn to interrogate and counter hegemonic ideologies of domination, "the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education" (hooks 49).

The course I created promotes engagement of multiple audiences by enabling students across disciplines to think critically about poverty, inequality, and social justice and to participate in creating new materials to expand the conversation. Mboup's and Gueye's testimonies call for a reflection that is interdisciplinary and inspires students to explore the relation between the university and society—and between knowledge and power—to develop their capacity for critical thinking and civic participation. As an essential supplement to the field of economics, the public humanities can lead students not only to question the world as it is but also to ask how it ought to be.

Note

1. The segments on both Femme Auto and Taxi Sister are included in the video "Sénégal: Femme Auto garage géré par une femme."

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