

## **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***

Berlin, Isaiah. *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*. Princeton University Press, 2013 (2nd Ed.) [E-copy in Bobst]

Ericsson, K. Anders, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward Cokely. “The Making of an Expert,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 2007.

[The Making of an Expert \(2007\)](#)

Gonick, Sophie. “The Violence of Urban Vacancy,” *Public Books*, 2020.

[The Violence of Urban Vacancy](#)

Hajkova, Anna and Michael Beckerman. "Treating Epidemics in a Nazi Ghetto," LA Review of Books, December 28, 2020.

[Treating Epidemics in a Nazi Ghetto - Los Angeles Review of Books](#)

"The Coup We are Not Talking About," Shoshana Zuboff *The New York Times*, January 30, 2021.

[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***

*Bloodlands*, New York: Basic Books, 2010. Read the Preface and the Introduction

*On Tyranny*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.

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/>

MSNBC "Crisis on Capital Hill," January 14, 2021.

[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*

Lamont, Michèle. *How professors think*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

[https://m.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/major-fallout-uvm-scholars-argue-that-cuts-to-the-humanities-would-imperil-the-universitys-mission/Content?oid=32189710&fbclid=IwAR15wkorl6-3qekIQq8I38uqdhVVuHN8Ihnp6R2I6Zjh\\_IToXGHMZfs1dSs](https://m.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/major-fallout-uvm-scholars-argue-that-cuts-to-the-humanities-would-imperil-the-universitys-mission/Content?oid=32189710&fbclid=IwAR15wkorl6-3qekIQq8I38uqdhVVuHN8Ihnp6R2I6Zjh_IToXGHMZfs1dSs)

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***

Kohl-Arenas, Erica. "The presentation of self in philanthropic life: The political negotiations of the foundation program officer." *Antipode* 49.3 (2017): 677-700.

[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***

Davis, Mike. *The Monster at Our Door: The global threat of avian flu*. Macmillan, 2006.

Lévy, Bernard-Henri. *The Virus in the Age of Madness*. Yale University Press, 2020.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EWMCi9h6h2Dy2YGIXxEZdGs5ce5wXiTn/view?usp=sharing>

Giorgio Agamben, "Meet the Philosopher Who is Trying to Explain the Pandemic," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/opinion/sunday/giorgio-agamben-philosophy-coronavirus.html>

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

*Special Guest: Kazembe Balagun, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From# BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Haymarket Books, 2016.

[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*

"How the Fight Over Spain's Anti-Fascist Legacy Involves a Former 'Nation' Editor," *The Nation*, December 28, 2020.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/world/spain-antifa-civil-war/>

"Spain's Catalonia Crisis Just Got a Lot Worse," *The Nation*, October 21, 2019.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/spain-catalonia-nationalism-unrest/>

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

Appadurai, Arjun. "Trump and the death of the Image."

Devji, Faisal. "TRUMP'S TRUTH: a response to Arjun Appadurai." *Anthropology Today*.

[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](#)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/23/google-timnit-gebru-ai-ethics/>

[Opinion: Timnit Gebru's Exit From Google Exposes a Crisis in AI](#)

<https://www.wired.com/story/timnit-gebru-exit-google-exposes-crisis-in-ai/>

[Plato and Proust can't save Silicon Valley](#)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/08/15/plato-proust-cant-save-silicon-valley/?arc404=true>

[Liberal Arts Majors Are the Future of the Tech Industry](#)

<https://hbr.org/2017/07/liberal-arts-in-the-data-age>

Broussard, Meredith. *Artificial Unintelligence*.

April 20: ***Gender and Expertise***

*Special Guest: Melissa Fisher*

Rebecca Solnit, "Men Explain Things to Me." *Guernica*, August 20, 2012.

<https://www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>

"Where are the women experts on covid-19? Mostly missing," *BMJ*, June 25, 2020.

<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/06/25/where-are-the-women-experts-on-covid-19-mostly-missing/>

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***