

Public Humanities Today: Between Community Engagement and Social Critique

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Introduction

It is somewhat difficult and challenging to write about Public Humanities in a historical moment in which we can argue with relative certainty that Public Humanities globally have not lived up to their task. Perhaps not entirely so, but it is somewhat difficult to argue that they have succeeded either. During a global pandemic, and we are still in it, Public Humanities, according to their basic mission and function, were supposed to flourish. We were expecting public humanists to engage with the public, to become interpreters of our confusing realities, or, at least, to train the public to see the world with fresh eyes. And yet, we are witnessing something entirely different: protests around the world due to lockdowns, denial of the existence of COVID-19, the rise of global conspiracy theories, and the anti-vaxxer movement becoming a global phenomenon. We have learnt that the Public is missing from Public Humanities. What we mean by failure is that, during the global pandemic, what has become increasingly present and clear is that the public (whatever we mean by this term, and we will get into that) seems to be incapable of living with contradictions. How did this come to be?

The aim of this chapter is to understand what Public Humanities are and how they are articulated and practised around the world today. We will argue that Public Humanities are neither a concept nor a discipline but rather a phenomenon. There are good reasons to approach Public Humanities through this optic. First, treating Public Humanities as a concept would lead us down a wrong path with the demand that this concept be robust, scientific or a closed well-rounded structure. If we were to treat Public Humanities like a concept, we would easily dismiss it for lack of rigorous definitions. While some would argue such a lack is a shortcoming, we will show that it can be seen as an advantage. Second, Public Humanities is not a discipline since it has no specific professional vocabulary nor a robust methodology. Numerous articles which pose the question of what Public Humanities are and try to answer it, aside from a healthy self-reflexivity, almost always end in either an obvious answer or the impossibility of grasping what the term really means. In this chapter we approach Public Humanities from various angles. We look into how Public Humanities came to be, what were the infrastructural conditions for their emergence, what were the reflections on what they might mean, and finally we look into two principal strands of Public Humanities that crystallised in the last two decades. The two-dimensional approach (infrastructure and practice) will shed light on some of the issues and problems we think need further engagement. In our conclusion, we offer some critical perspectives on how Public Humanities can further flourish without diminishing their impact.

1. The Infrastructures of Public Humanities

The historical emergence of Public Humanities is hard to date. On the one hand, we find ourselves in the debate as to whether such a history is redundant if humanities were often practised in public and concerned the public. On the other hand, the fact that Public Humanities gained prominence only in the last decade of the twentieth century does not give a whole story of its rather complex emergence. The breaking point in the history of the humanities in the United States and Europe is closely tied to the two world wars of the twentieth century. The aftermath of the Holocaust, the deep crisis of post-war Europe, both political and social, made possible a new role for the humanities – they were to foster civic life and critical thought as a way to struggle against violence, trauma and loss. And if humanities became a sight of consensus since the 1950s, it was so because critical thinking and/or the lack of it in public was responsible for creating new *community ties*. This role was a significant one since in Europe, at least, reckoning with the past and unprecedented violence was entrusted to the humanities not least due to the creation of the European Union, which was to have a political and not only an economic foundation.

Furthermore, this consensus was welcomed by the humanists. Not only did Hannah Arendt contribute, with her work on the *Banality of Evil*, to the cultivation of thought and the value of thinking, her argument was also welcomed on infrastructural grounds. The fresh breath of the new role of the humanities was crucial for history, literature and philosophy. The ethical insights of the humanities opened up new departments and studies: memory studies, curriculum studies, public history studies. Philology was now also expanded to include reading for ethical and political education.

In addition, the process of decolonisation and the Cold War were also reasons for Public Humanities to gain currency since the professionalisation of humanities had rendered scholars more isolated and less concerned with societal issues. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s pressed deep and hard on the institutions of knowledge, demanding greater democratisation and rethinking of the grand narratives of history by focusing on micro-narratives of the oppressed and creation of alternative knowledges. In this sense, the works of European thinkers who were later labelled as ‘poststructuralists’ were crucial in creating and driving these infrastructural changes. In addition, public history emerged both in the United States and Europe and challenged the hegemony of university-based historiography (Cauvin 2018: 8). And yet, what was unquestioned in these historical occurrences is the fact that universities were funded by public money in Europe – that is, there was a relative societal consensus that humanities education should not be regulated by the market. This consensus was broken in the 1990s.

The market-driven economies, deregulation and privatisation of the public assets also influenced the universities in Europe. The hardest hit were British universities and those in the United States. The mission, vision and practice of the humanities refocused on skill-based and work-oriented education. Post-war trauma was overcome and, while critical thinking survived, it lost its relevance in practice. Public Humanities in the United States and Europe emerge within this context as a response to the marginalisation of the role and practice of the humanities. The task of the Public Humanities is indeed a difficult one. Humanities were now to compete with other infrastructural changes made more prominent by the market: private foundations, think tanks and international agencies that were creating their own knowledge and visibly gained more influence in the decision-making processes than the humanities in the universities. In addition, with the new technologies, social media and access to knowledge humanities now also have a resource – they can

easily make their work visible, yet they do not make full use of the power of algorithms. If the university and humanities at large are to compete with questionable knowledges and new ontologies of data, the push for Public Humanities as a form of response to the crisis of humanities needs also to address some internal paradoxes.

In the European context, a welcomed novelty has been the creation of numerous scholarly networks and sub-institutions: the Arts and Humanities Research Institute at King's College London, Academy in Exile, the Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Citizenship and Migration (CEDIM) in Zagreb, and the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna, to name just a few. The various and numerous networks also eased the institutional exchange of knowledge and research results. There has also been an increase in the democratisation of museums, curating practices and public art initiatives, and archival work in visual arts has been flourishing. While on one hand these openings are important and bear witness to a tradition of thought that is nourished in Europe, the question remains: even if these tendencies might foster democracy, do they have any influence on the rise of violence in Europe or the economic regimes that increase inequalities?

Let us consider the following paradox: the European Commission is funding one of the most prestigious initiatives, the Horizon 2020. According to the official website, this project is 'the biggest EU Research and Innovation program ever with nearly €80 billion of funding available over 7 years (2014 to 2020) – in addition to the private investment that this money will attract. It promises more breakthroughs, discoveries and world-firsts by taking great ideas from the lab to the market' (Internet). Social sciences and humanities are also part of the project, and yet, when one reads what kinds of projects are funded, one can barely recognise the humanities as we know them. The role given to the SSH is one either of identity issues (cultural heritage, identity and history), or an economic one – innovation in policy and reform in order to sustain the economy. And while the results are published, printed and given over to the Commission, it remains unclear of their *public* influence. It is not only a question of the national and supranational infrastructures, but a question of a new 'consensus without the people' – a consensus in which humanities are reshaped in order to respond to the market, and in that sense, the question is whether the humanities have tackled this transformation sufficiently.

2. How Public Humanities are Thought

An analysis of Public Humanities as a phenomenon requires, for a start, a clarification of the term itself. Traditionally, the term has encompassed a wide array of cultural institutions and practices such as museums, art galleries, concert halls and public lectures (Hsu 2016). More recently, the term has also been associated with the issue of 'open access' to humanities research produced within academic institutions (Mandler 2014) – an issue which the humanities share with the natural and social sciences. Since the 1990s, however, the term Public Humanities has also been used in relation to a narrower phenomenon: the reaching out of university-based humanities to the broader society, which is often defined along the lines of 'outreach', 'community engagement' or 'community service' as the 'third mission' of the university, in addition to research and teaching. This reconceptualisation of Public Humanities originated within the debates about the humanities in the United States, but has since spread to other societal contexts, resulting in some modifications and elaborations (Armiero et al. 2019; Benneworth 2015b). Within this narrower definition, the stress in Public Humanities is on *humanities* – i.e., the fact that most of what has traditionally been understood by this term in fact falls within the domains of artistic and

cultural production, not humanities in the narrower sense of intellectual enquiry into the realms of symbolic production and human experience (among others, the domains of art and cultural production).

Whereas much of artistic and cultural production is intrinsically 'public', produced for the sake of public presentation, the 'humanities' in the sense of intellectual enquiry and academic research share with the 'sciences' the problem of self-referentiality, and face a challenge of 'becoming public', i.e., publicly relevant – as Gregory Jay notes, 'it may be difficult to see how humanities scholarship can advance community cultural development in quite the concrete ways demonstrated by projects in art, theater, and music' (Jay 2010: 51). We endorse the narrower meaning of Public Humanities as 'academic humanities striving to become public', and below we aim to identify the most important forms in which Public Humanities thus understood are thought and practised around the world. Our research has identified two principal modalities of understanding and practising Public Humanities, which we term the 'community engagement' paradigm and the 'social critique' paradigm (with some important overlaps). The first, dominant, paradigm of contemporary Public Humanities is firmly anchored in the American academic context, while the second, 'minoritarian' one has emerged in the European context.

(a) *Public Humanities as Community Engagement: From Outreach to 'Co-Production'*

The Discursive and Internal 'Crises' of the Humanities

The reconceptualisation of the traditional, cultural-institutional understanding of Public Humanities has evolved, as we have suggested, as a response to the ever-stronger 'crisis of the humanities', which originated as a form of discourse in the 1960s and has evolved over the course of the neoliberal revolution of the past decades (Benneworth 2015a, 2015b; Gale and Carton 2005). This global 'crisis of the humanities' is now a phenomenon which interweaves the dimensions of discourse and institutional reality, a kind of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. On the discursive level, humanities are facing a demand, which originated in the progressivist climate of post-Second World War capitalism and became stronger with the neoliberal revolution, to 'justify' their value for the broader society in the language of instrumental utility – primarily in terms of their 'contribution to societal development'. This discursive level of the symbolic production of the 'crisis' of humanities serves as a foundation for the actual policies which marginalise humanities by limiting funding opportunities, thus creating an ever-stronger actual 'crisis'. The basic enabling premise of this 'crisis production' is the fact that academic (unlike cultural-institutional) humanities share with sciences the mentioned challenge of *self-referentiality* – they actually amplify it, since they cannot (as sciences can) easily give an account of themselves in terms of instrumental utility.

Whereas sciences solve the problem of 'becoming public' directly through the production of instrumentally 'valuable' knowledge, humanities must devise other strategies. There has been a rich, ongoing debate about how best to respond (both discursively and empirically) to the 'crisis' of humanities (Olmos-Peñuela et al. 2015; Molas-Gallart 2015, Gale and Carton 2005; Small 2013), and one important point of agreement is that the publicly widespread strategy of response in terms of the humanities' intrinsic value for democracy (the 'democracy needs us' argument as Helen Small terms it) is insufficient – humanities need to *demonstrate* their capacity to enhance democracy (Small 2013;

Benneworth 2015a, 2015b). As Sylvia Gale and Evan Carton emphasise, 'The best way to argue for the relevance of the humanities is not to keep asserting its value but to demonstrate what it is capable of doing, within, across, and beyond the university's walls' (Gale and Carton 2005: 44).

The evolving conception of Public Humanities as academic humanities 'engaged' with the broader society can itself be seen as one central strategy of response to the crisis of humanities. But while the striving to 'become public' might to some extent be explained as a strategy of response, it must also be understood as a self-propelled attempt of critically minded humanities to 'actualise' their own transformative potential. In that sense, one might also speak of an internal productive 'crisis' of self-reflexive humanities which drives the ambition to become public. The two motivations, strategic and 'emancipatory', are hard to disentangle in empirical reality: as Paul Benneworth observes, the humanities' 'engagement' with wider society is almost always motivated by both the external, discursively produced and internal, self-reflexive moments of crisis, which he respectively terms as the 'immediate short-term political pressures, including the global financial crisis and subsequent fiscal austerity' on the one hand, and the 'longer term structural pressures to put knowledge to productive use in adjusting to deep-seated and intractable problems' on the other (Benneworth 2012: 8).

Overcoming the 'Missionary Model' of Engagement

The 'internal' crisis of the academic humanities – their striving to actualise their emancipatory potential and be an agent of societal improvement – long predates the external (discursively produced) crisis of the last decades. However, until relatively recently, the dominant approach to the overcoming of the crisis of self-referentiality has been the 'missionary' model of humanities' engagement with society, in which the humanities step out of the academic realm to 'enlighten' the broader society, and which rests upon elitist and epistemologically authoritarian premises: 'Insofar as the "application" category was intended to subsume engagement, it perpetuated a "missionary" model in which knowledge was first created on campus and then "applied" to "problems" off-campus, effectively pathologizing the community and future campus partners' (Jay 2010: 54). There is a near-consensus today among authors discussing what we termed the 'community engagement' model of Public Humanities that the missionary model is inadequate and outdated (Jay 2010; Hsu 2016; Benneworth 2015a, 2015b, 2012; Stanton 2012; Armiero et al. 2019; Gale and Carton 2005). There is also much convergence around the notion that the overcoming of the missionary model requires the epistemologically anti-authoritarian practice of the academic humanities 'co-producing' intellectual contents with actors outside academia (usually defined as 'partners' or 'users'). This model is sometimes defined as the 'in-process inclusion' of outside actors or the 'structuring of engagement' into the university's curriculum (Hsu 2016; Jay 2010), and it requires a substantial opening of academic institutions to outside partners with the aim of conducting 'projects of collaborative knowledge creation involving teams of individuals and organizations from on and off-campus in quite complex partnerships that sometimes take years to create' (Jay 2010: 54).

The spirit of the new, anti-hierarchical model of the academic humanities' community engagement is best encapsulated in Gale and Carton's claim that 'the humanities must be recast and re-articulated as a social practice, a practice not confined to interrogating social arrangements but involved in making them' (Gale and Carton 2005: 39). However, as the two authors themselves admit, this is somewhat easier said than done, and despite

the growing consensus on the necessity to supersede the missionary model of engagement, there is far less clarity and agreement on how this is to be achieved in practice. Even though it is nowadays mostly couched in terms of ‘involving the community’ in the production of knowledge, the ‘missionary’ model of community engagement is still dominant in academic humanities, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of the CHCI (Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes) member institutions still envisage ‘involvement’ in terms of public lectures or film series.

A more promising alternative can be found in a number of institutions and programmes in the United States devoted to engaged humanities such as the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas Austin and the Arts of Citizenship (AOC) programme at the University of Michigan, which conceive of engagement in terms of genuine, reciprocal and non-hierarchical exchange between academic institutions and citizens, the kind of engagement that subverts the ideological function of the ‘outreach’ model: ‘the outreach model reinforces conventional academic and public conceptions about the legitimate production and ownership of knowledge. A vital practice of the humanities, we believe, depends upon the breakdown of this hierarchy and this conception’ (Gale and Carton 2005: 40). In addition to breaking down the hierarchy between knowledge producers and consumers, the new model also aims at deconstructing the boundary between ‘scholarship’ and ‘engagement’ that is still implicit even in the more sophisticated versions of the outreach model: ‘Do not argue that engagement should be valued equally with research and scholarship: show that engagement IS research and scholarship, though it is also so much more’ (Jay 2010: 58).

This novel form of community engagement is exemplified by the University of Texas’ Humanities Institute’s project *Writing Austin’s Lives: A Community Portrait*, a 400-page volume consisting of citizens’ life stories and family histories – the paradigm shift from engagement as ‘outreach’ to engagement as ‘co-production’ of social reality between the academia and citizens consisted in this case in the inversion of the question ‘what if all of Austin read the same book’ into ‘what if all of Austin wrote it’ (Gale and Carton 2005: 41). This inversion has far-reaching implications beyond overcoming the unidirectionality of the ‘public lecture’ model – as Jay notes, the collaborative model opens a two-way channel of collective reflection by both academics and citizens on the very meaning of terms such as ‘public’ and ‘humanities’: ‘We do not have a consensus about what “the humanities” include or stand for; thus just as we need “critical reflection” on how we engage the community, we need to join with the community in critical reflection on what we mean by “the humanities” and what we want from them’ (Jay 2010: 52). However, the new model also brings the danger of purely ‘opportunistic’ (or strategic) engagement for the purpose of strengthening the ‘support base’ for academic humanities in the broader public¹ against the neoliberal administration and simulating an image of greater ‘value’ of the humanities for the broader community. Paul Benneworth and collaborators formulate three criteria in this respect for distinguishing ‘meaningful’ from opportunistic forms of engagement:

Firstly, the interests of the excluded community are represented and shape the activity rather than being passively in receipt of supposedly useful interventions. Secondly, there are clear structural community benefits through improving their positionality in societal allocation mechanisms which restrain them (cf. Sect. 1.4). Thirdly, universities have a dependence on the activities to achieve their missions, making them important in the institutional identity and/or organisation. (Benneworth 2012: 7)

A paradigmatic representative of the meaningful 'co-production' model of community engagement that supersedes the 'missionary' and 'outreach' models is undoubtedly the American national consortium of academic and cultural institutions and public programme administrators, *Imagining America: Artists + Scholars in Public Life* (Gale and Carton 2005; Jay 2010; Benneworth 2015b; Hsu 2016). The consortium, which was founded in 1999 at a White House conference, is devoted to the implementation of 'arts-based projects that link campuses and communities in common efforts to advance social justice' (Jay 2010: 51), and its member institutions define themselves in terms of a 'commitment' to 'bringing together scholars, artists, designers, humanists, and organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more just and liberatory "America" and world' (Internet). To that extent, the consortium understands Public Humanities as a key factor of progressive social change: 'Public Humanities, community engaged scholarship, and storytelling is central to the long-haul project of social change towards a more just, nurturing, and equitable world' (ibid.). Although the consortium has without a doubt created a valuable platform for genuine, meaningful engagement of humanities in a collaborative sense, it seems somewhat excessively focused on the transformative powers of art and design, the kinds of 'humanities' that are, as mentioned before, intrinsically public – and at the detriment of 'humanities' in the narrower, academic sense. Another community engagement perspective on Public Humanities which to some extent hypostatizes the force of art as a catalyst of change can be found in the Cultural Agents Initiative of Harvard University: 'Change requires imagination, thinking like an artist, so we learn from exemplary creative agents and share lessons that can challenge stale paradigms with artful alternatives' (Internet).

A number of institutions committed to Public Humanities make an effort to conceptualise *academic* humanities as intrinsically engaged and committed to social change along the lines of Jay's argument above. One such institution with a very strong public commitment in the humanities is the Center for Humanities Research at George Mason University. The CHR's aim is to 'demonstrate that research in the humanities is, by definition, "engaged scholarship" playing a crucial role in addressing society's most pressing social, civic, political, and ethical challenges, including immigration and nationalism, the ethics of science and technology, and the persistence of inequalities rooted in class, race, gender and ability' (Internet). An even stronger focus on pressing societal problems and social change can be found in the Center for the Study of Social Difference of Columbia University, which defines itself as an interdisciplinary research centre which conducts collaborative research projects on 'gender, race, sexuality and other forms of inequality to foster ethical and progressive social change' (Internet). The centre also shows a commitment to a *theoretical* interrogation of social reality that seems to go beyond the restrained, epistemologically anti-authoritarian spirit of community engagement: 'The discrete categories by which we identify people (such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity) have proven inadequate to understanding the complexities of power in our world. It is urgent that we understand the mutually constituted categories of difference that shape our social world and their cultural and economic impacts' (ibid.). A strong role for theory and critique in Public Humanities is also reserved by the Cogut Institute for the Humanities of Brown University, which features particularly in the Institute's initiative 'Political Concepts', which 'operate[s] under the assumption that our era urgently needs a revised political lexicon that would help us better understand the world in which we live and act, and that the humanities at large can and should contribute toward such a revision' (Internet).

The community engagement model of Public Humanities has of course spread to other parts of the world, and it can be found in institutions such as the Van Leer Jerusalem

Institute in Israel or the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna (IWM), both having evolved over the course of the Cold War (Internet). One notable example of developing the community engagement model of Public Humanities along theoretical lines similar to the Columbia and Cogut centres in the US is the International Center for Cultural Studies of the National Yang-Ming Chiao-Tung University in Taiwan, which has four interdisciplinary research clusters, Critical Theory and Asian Modernity, Contemporary Thought Trends and Social Movements, Gender/Sexuality Studies, and Visual Culture Studies (Internet). And the theoretically most ambitious project of Public Humanities that we have come across is the Laboratory for Social Sciences and Humanities of the Catholic University of Angola, which features as one of its research topics 'Social Reinventions and Development', the goal of which is to 'explore how main societal dimensions are currently being reconfigured and reconstructed in the context of profound, paradigmatic and conflictual transitions' (Internet). Topics addressed include 'social bound, citizenship, politics of identity, alterity and recognition, public/private, participation, inclusion, social functions of the state, the role of civil society and so forth' (ibid.). In South Asia, the influential Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi, India has aimed, since 1969, to synthesize academic humanities with social engagement: 'CSDS nurtures a productive tension between rigorous scholarly work and living social movements, academic engagement and political commitment, specialized publications and policy and media dialogues' (Internet).

(b) Public Humanities as Social Critique: Between Collaboration and Diagnosis

Some Limits of the Community Engagement Paradigm

As is evident from the above considerations, the community engagement model of Public Humanities is a bold, complex and politically powerful rearticulation of the conventional notions of university 'outreach' and 'involvement' understood as the third and least important 'mission' of the university. Its stress on the 'co-production' of knowledge and non-hierarchical, reciprocal collaboration with partners outside academia is premised upon a critique of the elitism and epistemological authoritarianism of the classical, 'Enlightenment' model of the humanities. The model is also informed by an understanding of what role the traditional outreach model, with its binary divisions of knowledge producers/consumers and of scholarship and engagement, plays in the ideological justification of the status quo. The community engagement model is undoubtedly a model of *critical* Public Humanities and its multiple subversions of the binary logics of conventional academia testify to its nature of being an 'enacted', or 'practical' social critique (as Gale and Carton reminded us, 'a practice not confined to interrogating social arrangements but involved in making them').

Such 'practical' critique is compatible with the strong epistemological anti-authoritarianism of its proponents: it empowers actors outside of academia without imposing on them any kind of worldview, substantive critique of social reality or a blueprint for social change. As Jay lucidly notes, the humanities scholars in the United States who endorse Marxism, cultural studies or poststructuralism have formulated 'radical' critiques of social reality, but in all likelihood their actual societal impact has been even smaller than that of earlier 'moderate' public intellectuals: 'In retrospect it appears that the scholarship of theory and cultural studies was easily accommodated by the institutional regimes of publication, tenure, and a new "star system" of celebrity thinkers who appealed

to an exclusively academic audience in contrast to an earlier generation of “public intellectuals” (Jay 2010: 53). To some extent, the problem of theoretical radicalism that is epistemologically authoritarian and difficult to reconcile with the perspectives of ordinary social actors resurfaces in the more theoretically minded agents of Public Humanities such as the Center for the Study of Social Difference of Columbia University, the Cogut Institute of the Humanities at Brown University or the Laboratory for Social Sciences and Humanities of the Catholic University of Angola.

The message of the community engagement paradigm is clear: theoretically ‘radical’ critique is futile if practised within conventional academia, while the engaged humanities have to relate to outside partners in democratic and approachable ways, eschewing the hermetic language of radical theory. But if social transformation is the goal of Public Humanities, and mechanisms of social domination and reproduction of the status quo are complex – as the proponents of the collaborative model admit – is the ‘practical’ social critique sufficient to significantly challenge deep-seated forms of ideology that produce the societal ‘doxa’ (Pierre Bourdieu), the feeling of ‘naturalness’ of our everyday life? Or is it rather necessary to both ‘make’ and ‘interrogate’ social arrangements at the same time – ‘make’ them on a micro level and ‘interrogate’ them on a macro level – and would this still be compatible with the ideal of epistemological anti-authoritarianism?

Co-producing Social Critique

The European academic context might provide some indications of how one might elaborate the community engagement model of Public Humanities in this direction. One enticing example is to be found in the Environmental Humanities Laboratory of the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Sweden and its project ‘Toxic Biographies’ (Armiero et al. 2019). The Institute’s Director, Marco Armiero, explains the project in terms of the collaborative model as we have defined it (the goal is ‘environmental justice’ as a form of ‘narrative justice’, produced jointly by scholars and communities exposed to contamination through storytelling) but with a stress on the synthesis of micro and macro levels, of structural social critique and community narratives: ‘EH can challenge hegemonic concepts such as growth, modernization, and competition while excavating the variety of ideas and experiences produced on the ground’ (Armiero et al. 2019: 8). The methodology of the project is defined as a ‘guerilla narrative’ which co-produces stories of contamination with the broader aim of challenging the ‘toxic narratives’ of the institutional order, by which the collaborators mean the macro-structural narratives of systemic legitimization (such as the ideologemes of growth and modernisation). To counteract toxic narratives, which are themselves buttressed by ‘science’ (narratives of ‘expertise’ used to delegitimise the claims of ordinary citizens about contamination) as well as conventional humanities (nationalist historiography), the guerilla narrative must synthesize stories of contamination with theoretical reflection. Armiero thus observes that ‘Toxic Bios has evidently built upon a rich feminist scholarship, which has recentered research and theories around the materiality of the body and the environment’ (ibid.: 10).

A somewhat more conventional example of Public Humanities as social critique can be found in the NIOD – the Dutch Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies – an institution founded after the Second World War which came to public prominence in 1996 in the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia and the failure of the Dutch peacekeeping troops to prevent it (Benneworth 2015b: 54). For decades, this humanities institute had researched and documented Dutch colonialism and collaboration in the

Second World War with relatively little wider societal impact. But the Srebrenica massacre became a crucial turning point, as the Prime Minister Wim Kok turned to NIOD to 'use its historical expertise to make sense of how the Dutch UN peacekeeping mission in Bosnia became embroiled in a war atrocity within the Bosnian Genocide' (ibid.). The institute's report placed the blame for the failure of peacekeepers on the Dutch government and Prime Minister Kok, who resigned soon after the report's publication. Bennenworth concludes that 'the sudden resignation of the Kok cabinet, and the political earthquake this brought, can be interpreted as a signal that the report has resonances for Dutch society as a whole rather than merely signaling capacity for functionally dealing with Srebrenica's psychic consequence' (ibid.: 56). Why is this episode a manifestation of Public Humanities as the 'co-production' of social critique? First of all, the writing of the report enabled NIOD to mobilise its expertise in counter-hegemonic historiography (critique of colonialism and collaboration) as a framework for explaining a seemingly contingent failure of the peacekeepers. Second, this counter-hegemonic explanation resonated with the broader public – the public was in that sense the 'co-producer' of the report, giving it the symbolic weight required to force the resignation of a prime minister.

A third modality of the social critique model of Public Humanities leads us back to the American context, in which one finds what might be termed a 'hybrid' type of this model that combines community engagement in the dominant sense (co-producing knowledge with the community through a horizontal and non-theoretical engagement with members of the community) with more epistemologically privileged forms of engagement based on expertise. Such hybrid model can be found at Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, which presents a somewhat different model of combining expertise and engagement than the more theoretically minded Cogut Institute. The John Nicholas Brown centre has recently produced the edited volume *Doing Public Humanities* (edited by Susan Smulyan), in which Public Humanities are defined as a 'practice that encourages social justice and explores the intersectionalities of race, class, gender and sexualities' (Internet). As part of the centre's programme, on 12 November 2020 a talk was given by Jordan Engel on 'Whose Maps, Our Maps! Decolonizing Cartography to Serve Movements of Resistance and Resilience'. The talk was based upon the Internet project 'The Decolonial Atlas', which defines itself as 'a counter-mapping collective centering Indigenous perspectives and challenging Western cartography's colonial roots' (Internet). The map editors are devoted to 'decolonizing professional cartography by revealing the cartographers' traditional biases and affirming the indigenous peoples' geographical perspectives' (Internet). The great variety of the 'decolonial' maps developed by the cartographers include 'Bandaiyan: Indigenous Names of Australian Cities', a map of 'New Years Around the World, 2021', 'Antarctica's Nearest Indigenous Peoples', 'The Centers of Economic Power', 'Alternative History: Europe as the New World' and 'Names and Locations of the Top 100 People Killing the Planet'.

An even more unconventional example of an institution which tries to synthesize theoretical social critique and everyday narratives within a non-authoritarian humanistic perspective can be found in the Institute for Signifying Scriptures in Pasadena, California. The Institute seems to be broadly situated within the poststructuralist tradition, as it understands 'scriptures' along the lines of Foucault's concept of 'discourse' – a scripture is essentially a formation of signs, objects and persons that is 'imbued with metaphysical meaning' (often of a religious kind, but not necessarily), and thus becomes a basic building block of social reality. The Institute's mission is to '... excavate "scriptures" as shorthand for and as sites of formation, performance and dis/closure', which suggests an

engagement with everyday narratives from a critical but non-authoritarian perspective, and its main social-critical focus is the 'challenge to view scriptures in more expansive and dynamic and critical-reflexive terms' (Internet). A similarly eccentric yet fruitful optic is employed by the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge at the University of Chicago, but with an even more pronounced pragmatist (anti-authoritarian) dimension which echoes the works of Richard Rorty. The questions that guide the Institute's research include: 'Where are the boundaries between knowledge and belief? What techniques do cultures deploy to encode and verify information, and how do technological developments – in forensics and measurement, for example – impinge on these areas? What awareness do societies show regarding what is contingent about their deepest commitments?' (Internet).

If one is tempted to assume that unconventional models of Public Humanities are only to be found in the West, one is mistaken: our final example takes us to Maputo, Mozambique, where one finds the independent research institution Kaleidoscopio – Research in Public Policy and Culture, established in 2012. The institution clearly nurtures the 'guerilla narratives' spirit of synthesizing humanities expertise with everyday experiences to subvert ideological and technocratic vocabularies of justification. Its research is organised in four thematic subjects: The Politics of Affect, Today's Heritage, Choreographies of Intimacy, and Everyday Technologies of the Environment. Within the Politics of Affect cluster, researchers argue that within the dominant paradigm of understanding 'development' as a result of rational and instrumental processes, 'there is little room for understanding the symbolic and affective dimension of economic and political processes that lead to development' (Internet). For this reason, Politics of Affect 'is devoted to the analysis of political representation at the same time that it seeks to document the voices of the beneficiaries of these public acts expressed in art form' (*ibid.*).

3. The Real of Doing and Showing: What We Can Learn from Europe

While the above considerations by no means constitute scepticism towards the community engagement path of the Public Humanities, we do argue that the paradigm developed mostly in the United States has missed some of the important struggles and achievements that the 'social critique' model has, willingly or not, produced in the public space. When Gregory Jay argues that the impact of radical critique is insignificant and that humanities must step outside of academia, implicitly suggesting that this method is better positioned to save the humanities, the reality of the public sphere in Europe of the last two decades suggests otherwise. Jay's perspective is deeply informed by the American reception of the critical theories of Europe, that were quickly adjusted and ventriloquised for the prestige of universities, as a currency of the maturity of the American intelligentsia.

However, it was precisely the radical critique that somehow got outside 'too much' into the public in Europe, where we are today experiencing a real resistance to change and critical thought. Consider that in France, in the last decade, several groups of conservative intellectuals and the officials from the French government have sounded the alarm about the influence of the supposed 'Islamogauchisme' within French universities. Even the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, has accused the import of American social theories to French universities as a threat to the Republic. At the heart of the storm was a shift within the humanities and social sciences in France, in which the establishment of gender studies, race studies and postcolonial studies were somehow jeopardising the stability of the Republic. And if the terms of debate (if there was any such thing) were articulated

politically, the core of the misunderstanding was precisely the power of the critique that Jay would deem insignificant: a critique of the dark side of the Republic, its colonial past and its rejection to consider the limits of universalism and the 'color-blind society' – be it in philosophical or political terms. Furthermore, the epistemological and intellectual attack from the French academia on academics working on social critique and cultural theories was termed in the spirit of panic, when, in reality, there are few academics working on these issues. Two sociologists, Patrick Simon and Juliette Galonnier, presented a study of 18,000 articles from a dozen social science publications between 1960 and 2020 in France, in which they found that only 2 per cent were about race.² Eric Fassin, a sociologist working on gender and race studies, argued that these attacks should be viewed in the light of a profound change happening in universities in France and Europe – the privatisation of the sphere once deemed to be the source of the public. Fassin notices that academics are being trapped within the logic of 'projects', time spent on looking for funding and proving 'excellence'. As a consequence, scholars need to adapt to institutional demands. This undermines critical thinking, which is less likely to be funded, and thus is at risk of being marginalised.³

Another example demonstrating the possibilities of humanistic social critique is the debate, or rather struggle, happening in the United Kingdom. In 2018, The Reform of the Gender Recognition Act catalysed a heated debate on trans rights and trans inclusion in the UK. The new system would exclude the long process of gender recognition and a trans person could obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate on the basis of making a statutory declaration about the gender they identify with. The most prominent view opposing the inclusion of trans people came from feminists who have named themselves gender-critical. In general, gender-critical feminists advocate the reserving of women's spaces only for cis women. The platform for these arguments mostly has been made in virtual environments and through shorter pieces in media outlets such as Medium.com and The Conversation as a way to reach broader and wider audiences, but also as a necessity since, according to Kathleen Stock, academic outlets are biased against gender-critical work (Stock 2018). Gender-critical feminists, often named TERF or trans-exclusionary feminists, have made a legal argument against the new law saying that the introduction of the system would harm women. However, the most important argument was the one which drew a sharp line between sex as a biological category and gender as a social category. Once this argument was presented in the public, and was debated on social media platforms, it unleashed diverse forms of hatred and transphobia as followers, readers and other allies used it as a way to incite violence with slogans and hashtags, such as 'trans women are not women'. What was supposed to be a discussion quickly turned into a division according to the argument made above. How did this happen? Gender-critical feminists, we would argue, manipulated the public sphere by presenting the arguments as absolute truths, and by refusing to philosophically and intellectually ground them in the practice of sound argumentation.

As Aleandro Zanghellini shows, the view that was presented in the platforms by Stock and her fellow scholars had long been debated and resolved within the walls of the university (Zanghellini 2020). The counter-arguments, which were supposed to be settled in the 1990s, resurfaced in forms of poor argumentation and dishonesty. As Zanghellini argues, the gender-critical position has been disputed several times in the past decade on three main philosophical grounds by simply reviewing the literature that has been in circulation for the last several decades. The main argument against gender-critical feminism is that we have no unmediated access to biological realities: they too become cognitively significant

to us through discourse, including the discourse of biology, which is itself (like any other discursive domain) structured by political, philosophical, social and cultural values. Thus, defining the concepts of 'women' or 'females' (as gender-critical feminists do) by reference to biological sex is itself a political choice, rather than one that can claim to neutrally reflect what the world is 'really' like (Conaghan 2018). This, for example, should have been enough to change opinions and attitudes within the public – however, it did not happen. Thus, we are faced here with what humanistic social critique can do – and it can literally save lives – and yet the violence, attacks and withdrawals of laws happen continually.

The power of humanistic social critique lies in its capacity to demonstrate the unsoundness and unreasonableness of arguments in public, but the main problem in both of the above examples is that we are having a misguided debate on the engagement versus critique approaches within the Public Humanities. While it is true that, in France, criticism is often reduced to ideology and activism as a way to delegitimise it, it is also true that scholars are having a difficult time responding to these attacks since they are focusing on the wrong diagnosis. We have suggested that privatisation is the problem, but it is not the main source of the attacks. At the core is an anxiety about social change and ontological insecurity of the states and peoples at hand – the affective side of the problems has been ignored. In the second example, we have seen how humanistic critique can do marvellous work and yet does not achieve the end of violence. The two examples have something in common, a common blind spot one might say: the question of the public. While scholars are focusing mostly on the *humanities*, the *public* remains relatively unthought, treated either as an abstraction or an algorithm. The public has undoubtedly changed, and we are bearing witness to its crisis, but humanities are somehow treating it as an entity frozen in time and space, as transhistorical.

4. Conclusion

Even though there are numerous reflections on Public Humanities in literature, we have found ourselves somewhat confused by the notion. It has oftentimes been treated as a cross- and interdisciplinary field, or as a concept. If, at the beginning, Public Humanities had a strong civic, educational and intellectual role after the big wars that devastated Europe and United States, the crisis we are experiencing today is vastly different. The reasons for *public* and *humanities* after the world wars were commonsensical – we needed to confront the immediate violent past, public history became prominent, the reasons for memory studies, critical thinking and public engagement could be summed up under the umbrella of 'never again'. The infrastructure followed. Universities in Europe and the United States were more open than they are today – the halls were full of students but also other people, a place for public and publicity, the engagement of public intellectuals fiercely defending their sound arguments, and writers and artists reading and thinking with humanistic intellectuals in order to transform societies. It is as if the generation of 1968 was living the dream of Public Humanities. The second crucial moment in the history of the Public Humanities came in the 1990s, when they resurfaced as a response to the neoliberal revolution. And although the goals and strivings of Public Humanities persisted – civic engagement, critical thought of the citizens, and a transformational notion of the public sphere – it seems that Public Humanities also became competitive and divided from themselves. If in the United States community engagement and public scholarship became tied up and closely related to the desire for less isolation and greater dissemination

of knowledge, in Europe the need for Public Humanities increased with the growing anti-intellectualism and provincialisation. The assault on the public itself and the privatisation and fragmentation of knowledge were never parts of the tradition of European thought. If anything, in Europe the universities were profoundly connected to the public sphere and the public good. Public Humanities in Europe thus had to respond to two demands: the self-reflected desire to move away from epistemological authoritarianism and the commitment to defend critical thought. This has sometimes been framed as an antagonism. If epistemological authoritarianism was to be deconstructed, it went hand in hand with a wave of privatisation and rejection of any authority in the field of thought. The simplistic interpretation suggested that if there is no authority anymore with which to argue for absolute certainty, then market itself was a way of knowing and comprehending the globe.

We suggested that, since the 1990s, the supposed crisis of the humanities and its subsequent remedy in the form of Public Humanities was thought too much in terms of a political rather than an epistemological problem. Revitalising humanities, be it in Europe or the United States, was thought politically in such ways that one either had to bring academics out of the ivory tower, the favourite American trope, or one had to reject the privatisation of universities – whether through private foundations or EU consortiums or initiatives offering a way out of the neoliberal era. And the ironic twist is that no matter how much humanities were self-reflexive, they need even more self-reflexivity: too often the struggles about articulating the terms in which Public Humanities could flourish concern infrastructural changes that take knowledge for granted. When scholars desire a different dissemination of knowledge or when they abhor the arrangements of the neoliberal agenda, they often forget that these problems are profoundly epistemological and concern the creation of knowledge. For example, when Gregory Jay wants community engagement to create new knowledge, he does not say in what ways this knowledge is different, on what grounds it stands, or how it is created, but takes this to be a given and transhistorical fact. Furthermore, within the European striving for transnational communities of scholars in terms of Horizon consortiums or other alliances and infrastructures, what remains out of focus is how these consortiums weaken or threaten the existing valid knowledges and consciousnesses. Critical thinking tends either to be presupposed as a skill or is treated as something that gets in the way of scholars becoming more involved in the communities. And the reason for this is that authoritarianism often gets conflated with authority.

The growing number of networks and hubs, the increased role of public and private foundations, seem to be concerned, above all, not with the quality of the perception and public, but with the quantity and attitudes. What we can observe, in some of the discussed examples, is the notion that the mere visibility of projects and consortiums is enough for us to claim that scholars are now ‘people like us’ – not experts, not public intellectuals, but ordinary actors. And while humanities are often obsessed with showing their relevance and importance, they sometimes forget that what has shifted and changed profoundly is the public itself. After the Second World War, the important role of the humanities was rarely disputed because the public was in a process mourning the loss and fathoming the unthinkable that had happened. So, while we are seeing the duck the whole time (the ‘humanities’ of Public Humanities), we forget about the rabbit – the public. Nothing of this means that the possibilities, paradigms and methods of Public Humanities discussed here are not crucially important, quite the contrary. Our wager is that by stepping back, by doing the work of the infrastructure of thought – setting, creating and interrogating the epistemological and phenomenological grounds of Public Humanities – we would not only further enhance the existing forms of public humanistic engagement, but we would

also finally get to the point of not having to waste time explaining the societal need for humanities. And this work is yet to be done.

Notes

1. Gale and Carton thus argue that engagement can produce a 'groundswell of public support – an outcry for the humanities – on behalf of institutes whose programming continues to be limited in that fashion' (Gale and Carton 2005: 44), while Jay notes that 'as government support for higher education withers, campuses can strengthen their support base by infusing engagement into the humanities curricula' (Jay 2010: 58).
2. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210325-studying-race-and-racism-in-universalist-colour-blind-france-islamo-leftism-islamo-gauchisme-academia-paris>
3. <https://www.hm-berlin.org/anti-intellectualism-as-a-reaction-against-the-rise-of-minority-politics-an-interview-with-eric-fassin/>

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