

Interfaculty Proposal, “A Case for Culture”

Faculty members of FAS, HBS, HKS, HMS, and SEAS with Martha Tedeschi of the Harvard Art Museums propose to launch collaborative research that would explore creating a hybrid genre of scholarly essays provisionally called “Cases for Culture.” The innovation is urgent now that humanities programs are losing ground to STEM fields in universities. In a world that moves fast on entrepreneurial and technological tracks, hardly pausing to consider the direction, arts and humanities seem like a waste of time to many people. Impatience with indirect or slow learning, let alone leisure – the original meaning of school in classical Greek – as time to reflect and to simmer, leaves the study of culture at the rearguard of developments. There, dedicated defenders of precarious ground ask themselves how to bring more people into museums, libraries, concert halls, and theaters. This is a life or death question for many institutions. Another urgent question is how to safeguard human sociability when the general public has lost a taste for the unhurried pleasures of doubt and discussion.

Cases for culture might offer proactive responses to anxiety about the loss of taste, about exhausted patience, and the corollary waning of thoughtful civic activities. Cases would support courses that Professors Sommer, Khanna, Habbal, and Becerra already teach and others that we can plan. The case method is common in practically every field of academic research, except for the humanities where arts and culture would come into focus. The method identifies a problem and then evaluates interventions. If we respond to worries about culture by designing hybrid essays between humanities and the sciences, a 25-35 page research “Case for Culture” might: 1. identify a social challenge; 2. study the causes and context; 3. speculate on possible interventions; 4. implement one; 5. design ways to measure impact and reflect on results.

One advantage of this format over existing essays is that it would make the humanities readable to people outside the field. Another improvement is that study and intervention would fuel one another in a virtuous cycle sometimes called praxis. Academic work would support restorative justice, addressing our obligation towards victims of abusive power (that can favor us). This way, scholars would confront the often unacknowledged bad faith that comes from investigating causes and conditions of suffering without taking responsibility for redress. Of course intervention is risky, which underlines the moral imperative to measure impact.

For humanists, improvements of readability and responsible risk-taking will follow from coming closer to other fields; and reciprocally, cases for culture would add the value of interpretation to the case method. Current cases don’t generally reflect on dynamics or on the untidy particularities that upset palimpsests of comparable data. Social sciences prefer patterns over irregularities, while humanists attend to surprises that can refresh systems. Scholars of business, law, politics, engineering, public health, and education have already pioneered the case method and stretched its reach. Some even dare to test conventional boundaries between subjective beauty and objective, quantifiable, goods. At the Harvard Business School, for example, one vanguard case examines the innovative leadership of Miles Davis; another tracks the extent to which public performances by Mayor Antanas Mockus saved water during a drought in Bogota; and still another computes civic benefits of classical music lessons for impoverished youth in Venezuela. They point toward hybrid research between arts and development, especially if humanists add reflections on the triggers and the dynamics of change. When the charm of unfamiliar interventions remains under-theorized, we forfeit some lessons to

be learned. The name of change is art, to put in plain terms what Friedrich Schiller proposed as non-violent responses to Terror during the French Revolution. John Dewey, Viktor Shklovsky, Jacques Rancière, and many others inherited this broad definition from enlightened pedagogies. Art means making something new, something that surprises and engages groups of people to reflect together. Humanistic writing about the aesthetic dimension of change promises to demonstrate that thinking like an artist is a condition for confronting social, economic, ethical, and political challenges.

We don't yet write cases for culture, and the reticence signals skepticism between the humanities and almost any other field. But a mixed genre would help to learn what works, what doesn't, and why. Simply put, it is to learn. This is relevant for everyone, unless we mistake an acquired allergy to practical involvement, on one side, and to the arts on the other, as a non-negotiable and sacred vow of abstinence. Good public humanities programs already move in the direction of service (in prison education, voter registration, after-school programs), though a nagging resistance to measurement and even to theory can pull scholars away from academic work when they leave campus. Are standard demands of academic publications and theoretical sophistication in fact incurably elitist and possibly damaging to a public mission? This would be a familiar double bind between doing good scholarship and doing good.

Cases for culture might help to untangle double binds. Raymond Williams puzzled over this paralysis when he worried about the keyword "culture." It has two different almost opposite meanings. For social sciences, he observed, culture amounts to patrimony: a set of shared things, beliefs and practices, a mechanism of convergence and preservation. It is certainly not a promising arena for change and development, but a collective mindset that resists change. For artists and humanists, on the other hand, culture points to a field of divergent risks, trial and error, experimentation, often unhinging the very paradigms that patrimony defends.

Decision makers -- trained mostly in social sciences -- understandably want to see results from investments. If they cut funding for culture in favor of technology or homeland security it is probably, in part, because they have been trained to be minimalist regarding culture, to do just enough to avoid conflict with groups of people. They certainly do not learn to identify culture's processes as ignition for social, economic, or political progress. Artists experiment freely, while social scientists worry about recklessness, concerned they may lose control, not to say dignity.

We have opportunities (that means responsibilities) to suture the divide in culture with projects that assume a "double bottom-line," a term adopted at the Social Innovation Studio at the Harvard Kennedy School for Government. The newly coined bilateral goal is both to generate income and to effect social change. One objective supports the other: money sustains good projects; and social projects insure that money does some good. Requiring both fiscal and ethical responsibility is a decision that we can collectively make. It would overcome the nagging double-binds that have for decades paralyzed engagement. An appropriate response to puzzling over a Gordian knot, such as the tangle between thinking and acting, is to cut with bold moves, such as Cases for Culture. Conveners

We propose to collaborate first with a seminar to consider how to promote these hybrid cases, and then to develop courses, publications, and public events.

Timeline:

- September, 2018, Day-long Seminar “Cases for Culture” to launch collaboration
- October 2018, review of proceedings and round of comments by participants.
- Fall 2018 – SOCWORLD 47, “Thinking Like an Artist” Module, development of existing collaboration of Sommer in course taught by Khanna
- Fall 2019 – IA 13, developed materials for “Rx: Arts for Global Health,” with Sommer and Mercedes Becerra.
- Fall 2019, new course, Habbal and Sommer: “Innovation Arts: Technology and Humanities”
- Spring 2019, Launch of on-line publication series, “Cases for culture” shared link among participating departments and schools.

Budget:

-travel and lodging for participants including 6 foreign scholars - \$10,000.-

1. Pier Luigi Sacco (economist - adviser to Commissioner of culture, European Union;
2. Dr Paul Salins, Narayana health, Bangalore. Maxillofacial surgeon, oncologist, painter, fashion designer, general polymath
3. Nabil Harfoush (Professor, OCAD),
4. Veronique Hillen (Dean Paris d. School)
5. Arrianna Mazzeo (Dean Elisava, Spain)
6. Kirsten Langkilde (President of Hochschule für Kunst und Gestaltung Alternate: Enrique Marquez (Secretary of Culture, Veracruz, México).

Local participants would include:

7. Edward Saywell, head of exhibitions at MFA
8. Narayan Khandekar director Straus Center for conservation, Harvard art museums
9. Elizabeth Hinton, History and AAAS, Harvard University
10. Alejandro de la Fuente, History and AAAS, Harvard University
11. – 13 Conveners: Fawwaz Habbal (SEAS), Tarun Khana (HBS, HKS) , Doris Sommer (FAS)

- Meals and coffee breaks - \$ 2,000.-

- Recording and transcription - \$5,000.-

-Administration of event and transcription follow-up - \$5,000.

Total: **\$22,000.-**

SEAS can dedicate funds to defray costs - \$3,000.-

Total requested from Provostial Funds: **\$19,000.-**