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Eddie Webster, Public Humanities Madala

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Abstract

This article reflects on the meaning of “public humanities” from the perspective of research and teaching in South Africa today. I reference the ways in which people have remembered the recently deceased Professor Eddie Webster (my first sociology professor) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and how he himself saw his critically engaged public work in the trade union movement and globally during both Apartheid and the post-Apartheid democratic government. In particular, I explore how his unique form of public humanities inspired his former students to be socially engaged citizens as they entered a diverse range of occupations and careers. I draw on Michael Burawoy’s depiction of the Webster windmill (public engagement, principled intervention, social justice and radical reform, expanding research programmes with a sociology of the south, and institution building) to suggest what public humanities means in the context of research and teaching. I draw on tributes from colleagues and former students – not to focus on Prof Webster’s significant academic and political work but to distil what it was about his teaching and critical engagement that suggests he is an exemplar of what is meant by public humanities.

Keywords: activist academic; critical engagement; principled intervention; public humanities

The late South African sociologist Eddie Webster is known as a “Sociology Madala” – an elder man – but his embrace of the times he was in also makes him a “public humanities Madala.”

While Webster was not alone as a critical voice during the Apartheid era, he was a pioneer of the academic study of the sociology of work and labour in South Africa. Acting against repression and supporting resistance to authoritarianism both inside and outside the university, his particular form of sociology, in which the researcher and the researched are in dialogue in the public sphere, was termed “Public Sociology” by his good friend and collaborator Michael Burawoy.¹ This was a particularly dangerous route to take as the Apartheid government always tried to limit public dialogue. Despite how this route alienated the state – Webster was labelled an “enemy of the state” – he consistently sought to open spaces of critical discourse both inside the university (such as the Sociology of Work Institute) and outside (as with the South African Labour Bulletin).

¹ Burawoy 2004.

If the Humanities help us understand who we are, what we do, how we do it, why, and with what consequences, then Eddie Webster is an embodiment of public humanities – not only because of his public engagement (using his voice in op-eds and papers) but also by being both an architect and a builder, as his lifelong friend and fellow academic Professor Jacklyn Cock describes him, one who “conceptualised and built spaces of agency”: an activist academic, a critical engagement with each person, organisation, institution, and political party with a strong purpose of moving towards social justice.² His critical engagement meant never getting drawn into the politics of the organisation that he was studying, whether trade union or political party, but staying rooted in social justice.³

He was my teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. He had that unique ability to really listen and to see you. His programme gave young activists a grounding to the positions we were adopting, a theoretical appreciation, and it instilled confidence in us.

After a long period away from academic life, I returned in 2013 to join the Cultural Policy and Management Department at the Wits School of Arts. It was Eddie that I asked for a reference, despite the role not being in the field of sociology. When I retired, it was Eddie that I referenced as my biggest inspiration for the kind of activist academic I had become, the teacher I had evolved into, respecting and valuing the voices of my students, the critically engaged research I went on to do, and the principled policy interventions I was supporting across the African Continent.⁴ He passed away 3 weeks after that party. I am grateful that I was able to publicly thank him.

Drawing on Burawoy’s depiction of the Webster windmill, I present five interconnected blades as the core of public humanities.⁵ The first blade is a commitment to a research agenda and scholarship primarily responsive to emergent public and policy issues, and what Burawoy calls a “prodigious intellectual engagement.”⁶ The research agenda asks not only questions that really matter at that time but also those that evolve as times change, new insights are revealed, and different challenges are confronted.⁷ It is one that adopts “a methodology of research and theorising that is not simply grounded in but deeply engaged with the local.”⁸ Deep research and insights from a particular context allow a public humanities researcher to develop a new understanding of that context that can in turn help shape our understanding of global challenges. This decolonial research agenda goes far beyond localising research against a dominant global north academic field. Rather, it provides “an example of how theory formulated in the global South can speak back to an academic field dominated by Norther Scholars.”⁹ Public humanities requires a deep commitment to social justice, ensuring that the way in which research is conceptualised, conducted, written, and presented is in line with this commitment. Webster’s “insatiable

² Cock 2024.

³ Sefalafala 2024, 21.

⁴ I explore this idea of activist academics (Joffe 2019) as well as arguments for a decolonised curriculum in our university (Gaio et al. 2023). I am always keen to ensure my critically engaged research is public-facing to ensure greater access to ideas developed in the academy. This includes developing tools to support the creative arts sector to ensure equity, justice, and fairness in their international cultural cooperations (Farinha et al. 2022) and promoting the idea of decent work for cultural and creative workers on the African continent (Joffe and Wangusa 2022).

⁵ Burawoy 2024, 84.

⁶ Burawoy 2024, 83.

⁷ Sitas 2024, 8–10.

⁸ Burawoy 2024, 94.

⁹ Bezuidenhout 2024, 11.

curiosity” about these challenging questions led him to work collaboratively with many others, whether students, colleagues, or trade unionists; he would insist “there is no such thing as an original idea” and that only through wide reading, discussions, and interactions would new thinking emerge.¹⁰ His research embraced many agendas: the transformation of work, the transition to democracy, the informalisation of the economy, responses to global patterns of marketisation, addressing the decent work deficit, work and inequality in the digital age, and many more.

The second blade is a passion for teaching and learning. Public humanities means acknowledging students as a public with their own diverse lived experiences and knowledge and being able to knit this together with other experiences and more formally constituted knowledge.¹¹ In this vein, Webster was a “formidable teacher” who thoroughly loved and enjoyed his students and would intentionally provide opportunities to stretch their thinking beyond the university in pursuit of social justice.¹² This stretching of thought often came with an unusual confidence in young student’s ability to effect change. It was my absolute privilege to find myself in his classroom during my undergraduate degree when he asked me to do research to support his work with a collective bargaining process which in fact led to wage increases. Through this simple act of asking me to do this research as an undergraduate student, my commitment to using my privileged access to information, research, and ideas to contribute to social justice was assured. This belief in the ability of students was extended to many, and again I was privileged to be the recipient of this when the University of Cape Town (UCT) asked him to share his radically transformed industrial sociology curriculum. He convinced UCT that it would be better if one of his students were to teach this curriculum to thoroughly embed it into that institution, hence my first teaching job as a junior lecturer in Industrial Sociology.

His critically engaged scholarship inspired generations of us to become “agents of radical, deep transformative change.”¹³ This passion for teaching and learning is not limited to a classroom but is experienced by many publics. The research, teaching, and support Eddie Webster showed the labour movement are clear in the name “comrade Prof” that union shop stewards and organisers gave him. As Andries Bezuidenhout argues, “To build institutions and movements, you have to build people, and this is maybe the most radical thing anyone can invest their time in.”¹⁴ While his form of critical engagement was rooted in sociology, the general anti-apartheid project in the academy was deeply interdisciplinary and shaped by a critical and appreciative engagement of Marxist and Feminist scholarship. I recall my fellow, Robin Murray, now sadly deceased, when in 1986–88 I was studying for an MPhil at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex being surprised at the range of Marxist readings I had access to, had studied, and referenced in my work during this Apartheid period.

The third blade associated with work in public humanities is the willingness to participate in a public engagement that is more than the broadcast of ideas via op-ed pieces, social media, books, articles, or interviews but requires a virtuous circle where research is translated so that those being researched are able to feed back into the research agenda. Such a contribution to a public sphere of dialogue often requires resources. Webster was uniquely able to mobilise the institutional resources of the university in the service of workers’ struggle and to ensure that a meeting place was created for researchers and the researched to engage in findings, dialogue

¹⁰ van Holdt 2024, 34.

¹¹ Burawoy 2024, 91; Motsoetsa 2009.

¹² Sitas 2024.

¹³ Cock 2024.

¹⁴ Bezuidenhout 2024, 13.

about their meaning and interpretation, and even consider policy options.¹⁵ One form of such meetings was the monthly SWOP breakfasts that many of us attended as students, staff, and colleagues, which clearly contributed to a “public sphere of dialogue.”¹⁶ As Burawoy recalls, “The SWOP breakfasts serve multiple functions, generating public debate but also building a network of institutions upon which SWOP can draw in pursuing further research.”¹⁷ Webster never discouraged getting one’s hands dirty working for change. However, while working in support of movements for progressive change, he insisted that this still required university-based academics to “retain autonomy and intellectual integrity.”¹⁸

The fourth blade suggests that this broadening of public dialogue requires a principled intervention that is different from policy intervention (a form of consultancy). It might also require constructing an imaginary line as Webster did – a “metaphorical picket line” – that is continually drawn and redrawn as new conflicts arise and different terrains of conflict need to be negotiated as change is constant.¹⁹ The struggle against Apartheid required an interdisciplinarity that was not only academic but also implemented in our activism.²⁰ A public humanities requires a deep understanding of the power structures of society, which, for Webster, also meant the key to changing society.²¹ Believing that “any form of oppression and exploitation can and should be challenged,” Webster was convinced that change was best done when people organise collectively – whether they be students, workers, academics, citizens, or communities.

Finally, to enable a productive public humanities, it is necessary that the University itself reflects these values and is guided by ethical principles, engages in the social issues of its time, and is committed to various publics, both internal and external.²² The commitment to building the university was itself a contested terrain for Webster, with many counterclaims described well by Burawoy: “Across the planet a destructive combination of marketisation and governmentality is transforming the university – corporatising its management, auditing its output and commodifying its knowledge.”²³ From the moment of his appointment in 1976, Eddie began his transformation agenda for the university. He also built institutions within the university to ensure his project of public engagement on labour, society, and politics could flourish (SWOP, the Global Labour University Programme, and more recently the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies). He was a critical voice in the university but always upheld the integrity of the institution. He supported his staff and students at the University in the early 2000s when the university proposed outsourcing the cleaning and maintenance staff. SWOP was already working on these issues, and several colleagues across the Humanities wrote a critical report about the strategy of outsourcing:

The VC called Eddie to rein in his staff, threatening that he would bring us up on disciplinary charges for protesting. With the force of moral certitude that so characterised Eddie, he defended us and our academic freedom ... He was also trying to engage management behind the scenes. It was not easy, then, when his staff chose their own

¹⁵ Levenson 2024, 71.

¹⁶ Burawoy 2024, 88.

¹⁷ Burawoy 2024, 84.

¹⁸ von Holdt 2024, 33.

¹⁹ Burawoy 2024, 90.

²⁰ Whether that activism took the form of trade unionism, protest theatre, political satire, activist journalism or civic engagement (Sitas 1986).

²¹ Bezuidenhout 2024, 11.

²² Williams 2024, 14.

²³ Burawoy 2009, 95.

avenues of critique, but he never wavered, always principled and always absolutely firm on where he stood – to defend our right to engage the university around its policies and actions and our right to protest. He had a long history of such interventions, testifying to and defending workers’ and students’ right to contest injustices on campus and beyond.²⁴

In his challenge to the university, Webster collaborated with fellow academic in SWOP, Jacklyn Cock, insisting on the need:

to revisit our external stakeholders to see how they perceive us in the face of the multiple crises of increasing inequality, casualisation of labour and ecological devastation[.] Indeed, is it not time for all South African universities to revisit their multiple publics and explore with them what a public university in southern Africa in the 21st Century could – and should – become?²⁵

A public humanities asks that we engage with multiple publics and counter publics both inside and outside the university.²⁶ Interacting both within established institutions and lines of authority, such as the university, and moving seamlessly with new institutions, such as trade unions in the struggle against authority, Webster was able to actively demonstrate the necessity and contradictory nature of the interrelation of publics and counter-publics in our society.

Outside the university, Webster supported, built, and revitalised networks to support “a project of human flourishing” from the South African Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, the *Global Labour Journal*, the *South African Labour Bulletin*, and the Chris Hani Institute.²⁷ As Michelle Williams recalls, “For Eddie, because of the historical importance of labour in fighting against injustice and in building a democratic and just society he dedicated much of his intellectual life to labour broadly conceived.”²⁸ Students and workers, academics and university administrators, trade union, and government officials were not only equally important to him; he also built unlikely bridges among them, presented options and listened to everyone, and provided robust motivations for alternative conceptions that spoke to the challenges of the time.

These five blades of the public humanities are necessary to collectively create “another world,” as Jacklyn Cock so eloquently puts it: “to redistribute power and resources, to challenge the savage inequalities and injustice of the present.”

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²⁴ Kenny 2024, 18.

²⁵ Sitas 2024, 10.

²⁶ Warner 2022.

²⁷ Sitas 2024, 9.

²⁸ Williams 2024, 15.

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These include the following:

Prof Andries Bezuidenhout, University of Fort Hare, "Obituary: Eddie Webster's influence over generations of students extended to the country and beyond its borders";

Prof Michael Burawoy, "Southern windmill: the life and work of Edward Webster," a paper first presented in 2009 at a colloquium in honour of Eddie Webster;

Prof Michael Burawoy, Sociology Department, University of California – Berkeley, "My Times with Eddie Webster";

Prof Bridget Kenny, Department of Sociology, "For Eddie Webster,";

Prof Bridget Kenny and Dr Ben Scully, RC44 Research Committee, International Sociological Association;

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Dr Thabang Sefalafala, GLU and Department of Sociology;

Prof Ari Sitas, Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town, "Edward Webster – an appreciation";

Prof Imraan Valodia, Pro Vice Chancellor and Director of the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, "The 'Sociology Madala' who shaped the way we think about the world";

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Dr Michelle Williams, Head of Department, Sociology, "A farewell to our beloved Eddie."

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²⁹ McGregor and Williams 2024.

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