

A taste of Hard Times

The teaching of social science subjects can come alive when literature is added to the mix, David Aberbach argues



We hear a lot about interdisciplinary research these days, but some academics, including myself, believe it is no less important for teaching to address issues from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

If students are to become versatile professionals ready to tackle the complex global problems that face their generation, they need fuller awareness of how various disciplines interact with one another. There are fields of learning, yes, but their isolation is artificial: they are as much a part of the mass of knowledge as countries, regardless of borders, are part of the globe.

I came to cross-disciplinary studies by accident. As a literature professor in a department with low enrolment, I was urged to set up popular courses. Because I had a background in the social sciences – including a BSc in social sciences from The Open University – my solution was to develop courses in loss, charisma, nationalism and poverty that brought literature and the social sciences together.

These courses, which I called “bridges”, are based on the view that literature is often more deeply understood in the context of wider historical, social, political and psychological issues. It is also true that the study of social science is greatly enlivened when literature is included.

One example of this mutually beneficial interplay stems from the observation that a disproportionate number of great writers were orphaned in childhood. As biographical trauma often drives and marks literature, the reading of Wordsworth or Keats, for example, is enriched by knowledge of the clinical work of John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes on loss and separation. But it is also true that writers have greater capacity than clinicians to describe and depict such loss.

Meanwhile, politics students would benefit from reading politician-poets, such as Mahmud Sami al-Barudi in Egypt, Pablo Neruda in Chile, Aristotle Valaorites in Greece, Léopold Senghor in Senegal and W.B. Yeats in Ireland.

None of these poets was stuck in an ivory tower. To Yeats, a founder of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and, later, a senator in the Irish Free State in the 1920s, the quotidian concerns of politics were not incompatible with the myth, folklore and superstition that inspired his poetry. Rather, myth was integral to politics: a key to a nation’s unique identity, its collective unconscious.

Neruda and Senghor, too, believed that poetry could make things happen. Neruda’s life as a Communist senator in the Chilean legislature was, in a sense, a natural outgrowth

of his poetry, an expression of his feeling for humanity and human resilience in adversity; while Senghor, Senegal’s first head of state, was a major francophone poet, his poetry and politics illuminating one another. “To fight for national culture”, he wrote, “means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation.”

History students who study charismatic early 20th-century European leaders could gain from the literary insights of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, for example, or Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Such writers often had lives apart from their writing: Shakespeare a successful businessman close to the court; Conrad a shrewd Polish sea captain on French and English ships. They understood how a society can be hurt fatally by leaders whose outstanding gifts can bring about their downfall.

Meanwhile, anyone seeking to understand the chronic religious hatred driving the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s should read the 19th-century Serbian poet and head of state, Petar II Petrović-Njegoš. And those bewildered by the power of Egyptian popular opinion to erupt – amply demonstrated in recent weeks – would do well to read Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel laureate for literature.

Students of international development might be surprised to learn, through reading Dostoevsky, Zola and Orwell, that aspects of poverty that they assume to be largely confined to developing countries are also integral to the history of the West. The latter, at the start of his literary career in the late 1920s, adopted the life of a poorly fed tramp, far removed from his Eton schooling, in order to understand the enormous gap between rich and poor in interwar society, which he later described in *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

Dickens, who probably did more than any 19th-century legislator to agitate for improvements to the lot of the poor, remains relevant in much of the world today: for example, in his depiction of London child labour in *David Copperfield*.

These and other writers, although not lacking faith in humanity, give a powerful critique of the many illusory solutions to poverty that dominate much of history since the French Revolution, including science and technology, social reform, socialism, fascism and capitalism.

Armed with such an understanding, those who go on to positions of political leadership may just do better than their forebears, and improve the lot of millions of people across the globe.

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