

Philosophers Are the Only Academics Who Get the Blues (or Need to)

Kurt Stemhagen

Virginia Commonwealth University

As a music lover/musician who has listened to and played my share of blues, and as interested as I was in last year's Memphis conference theme of the blues, in the end I just couldn't bring myself to submit a paper. I had avoided thinking too hard about why I didn't submit until I was handed David Meen's excellent paper. Was it forward-oriented progressive thinking, cowardice, or something else that kept me from participating? Did I feel that claiming the blues in any way as "my" art form was disrespectful at best and, at worst, an act of outright cultural appropriation? While not solving all of these riddles, crafting this reply has proven very fruitful. Meens has helped me to see how cultivating a blues influence (via Cornel West) can deepen my understanding of pragmatism, of democracy, and of my own thinking about what it means to be a philosopher of education at this particular historical moment. Perhaps most importantly, Meens' paper has helped me to think about some ways I can better fulfill my commitment to teaching/writing/acting for progressive social change.

West's inclusion of Chekhov as a bluesman opens the door for a vision of the blues as for more than just African-Americans. I have often thought of Springsteen as providing an American version of Russian literature. Rock 'n' roll's strong ties to the blues are well documented and it is interesting to explore why I have been more comfortable in Springsteen's realm - replete with out of work union members, knocked up girlfriends, no-hope dreamers with stars in their eyes and no way out of their decaying factory towns, drivers of stolen cars, etc. - than I am with classic blues scenarios. A short possible answer, and one fairly uncharitable toward myself, is that it is probably easier to pose as a member of an oppressed economic class than an oppressed racial group. There's probably more to it than this, though. I am also a big fan of a band, Lucero, a white, blue-collar, country/blues-tinged rock n' roll band from Memphis, Tennessee. They often sing about their ephemeral good times in light of the fact that they never really had a chance and how they probably would've fucked it up if they ever got one (their words, not mine). Class and race theorists/scholars have a long history of not playing nice together. Maybe West's expansion of what gets to count as the blues and who gets to be a "blues man" is one promising way to help marginalized groups to find ways to work together and increase their power in the world.

Let's move on from the politics of blues talk and do something that might more nearly approximate philosophy. Meens presents two ideas that I want to explore in this reply. Both draw on Cornel West and both get at Meens' (and West's) ideas of what lies at the heart of the blues. First, I was struck by West's claim that the "essence of the blues (is) to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or

pessimism.”¹ The second is Meens’ invocation of West’s notion of tragicomic hope and its positioning as part of our “Deep Democratic Tradition.”

“Star(ing) painful truths in the face and persever(ing) without cynicism or pessimism” is foundational to how I view my job as a philosopher who positions himself within the social foundations of education. Certainly one could, as many presumably do, view their home discipline as situated in the social foundations for categorization/bureaucratic purposes and nothing more. If, however, we see their work as a philosopher as nourished by the normative commitments of social foundations, with its explicit bent toward equity, justice, and opportunity, then this first claim will likely resonate with our work.

I have always viewed my job teaching social foundations (particularly in teacher preparation) as figuring out just how much painful truth pre-service teachers can take and bringing them right up to that edge. Certainly, it is bleak out there for teachers. If they are going to do their job well, they need to come to know this bleakness. The trick is how to do this in a way that leaves them knowledgeable yet still ready and excited to work to make things better for the profession and, more importantly, for the kids they will teach, for their students’ families and, ultimately, for the communities in which their work is undertaken. The cultivation of critique *and* hopefulness and learning to strike a productive balance between the two is an ongoing project. My starting point is to frame teachers’ work as follows:

1. Many go into teaching because they see it as a way to do meaningful work with promise to improve social conditions
2. Public schools have at least a historical commitment to serving as a lever of social/economic equity. Yet, it is well-documented that schools often short change kids and communities needing the most help.
3. Therefore, just being a teacher will not necessarily lead to doing fulfilling work and “making a difference.” To matter, you need to be a certain kind of teacher.

Happily there are a variety of ways to be a teacher that matters. I believe that a necessary foundation for any of these ways is understanding the unvarnished realities about teaching, schools, and society. Certainly, this is not a struggle-free education.

Meens’ second point has the promise to help me get better at this kind of pre-service teacher education, as it brings our focus to the tragicomic aspects of the blues and, in particular, to the possibilities of tragicomic hope. As a Deweyan pragmatist, I have always been interested in, and intermittently persuaded by, the critique that while long on hope, Dewey lacked an appreciation of the tragic dimensions of life. Certainly, a blues-inflected tragicomic hope seems more useful in 2016 than does any simple form of hope. This seems especially true in thinking about what is required to understand contemporary education. Richard Rorty’s Dewey exemplifies this primacy of the comic over the tragic:

What he had in mind is that both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind. I think the most one can do by way of linking up pragmatism with America is to say that both the country and its most distinguished philosopher

suggest that we can, in politics, substitute *hope* for the sort of knowledge which philosophers have usually tried to attain.²

Now, I am all for the hope-over-certainty project, but the details of how to carry it out in schools of education seem both important and difficult to define. A blues-inspired tragicomic hope has promise to help. Qiana Whitted explains that blues narratives “confront racial trauma with a sadness that is, to quote Langston Hughes, ‘not softened with tears, but hardened with laughter’.”³

For some time, I have considered taking on a project about the potential of humor in social justice work.⁴ In particular I have been thinking about Harry Shearer’s *Le Show*. This weekly hour-long radio show/podcast is designed to allow Shearer, a comic actor/satirist, to inform listeners about a variety of abuses of power, ill-advised deference to experts and authorities, counterproductive political posturing, and the like. Harry Shearer’s use of humor seems to increase our tolerance for critique. I tune in to this often and, were it not for Shearer’s sense of humor, his recognition of the absurdity of our human circumstance and - I think - the implied hope that informing us could lead to democratic action, there is no way I would put myself through what could be seen as such a bleak hour of radio programming.⁵ To be honest, it is the hope that keeps me coming back. It is also hope that gives promise to my work as a philosopher of education and teacher of social foundations. I could never be as funny as Shearer and I wouldn’t try, but I can certainly recognize and highlight the tragic elements of existence (and of schooling) and, I believe, I can recognize these elements without losing hope through cultivation of a sense of the tragicomic.

Finally, to bring this more directly back to questions of how and whether the blues relates to philosophy of education: I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Harry Shearer’s show is broadcast from New Orleans (a serious blues town) and that his satire got its start on an early 1970s FM (blues-derived) rock station. Shearer’s organic fusion of music and humor with a commitment to speaking truth to power as a way to work for justice seems a worthy inspiration for this philosopher of education. In light of Meens’ article, I also see it as one potential avenue for accessing West’s focus on the potential of tragicomic hope both as a way to deepen my own philosophical work with pragmatism and to bring it all to bear on working for progressive social change. I thank David Meens for writing his paper and pushing me in these directions.

1. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

2. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books: New York, 1999), 24.

3. Qiana Whitted, “The Blues Tragicomic: Constructing the Black Folk Subject in Stagger Lee,” in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, ed. Frances Gateward and John Jennings (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ, 2015), 235.

4. A number of philosophers of education have worked in this area. See, for example: Barbara Stengel, “After the laughter,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2013): 1-12; Cris Mayo, “Humorous Relations: Attentiveness, Pleasure, and Risk,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 2 (2014): 115-119; and Liz Jackson, this volume.

5. There are similarities between *Le Show*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* but, with the possible exception of John Oliver, these shows foreground entertainment over their watchdog capacities.