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## **Becoming Worldly: Why Universities Matter<sup>1</sup>**

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*But at dawn today he had told himself to go out into the world again.* (Nadeem Aslam, 2004, 369)

Universities are centrally concerned with the sustainability of research, scholarship and teaching. These practices – in varied combinations – constitute the field of higher education: research and scholarship inform teaching which in turn helps disseminate research and enrich scholarly discourse.<sup>2</sup> The continuity of human understanding from generation to generation is preserved, therefore, through the practices of higher education within an institutional context of which universities are an important element. That continuity is often conceptualised as one of selective transmission: the accumulation of received wisdom culled from the past and carried forward into the future. Underlying this notion of continuity is a view of history as either inherently progressive (the so-called Whig view of history) or in terminal decline (a view associated more with a conservative cast of mind). In this paper I present a different view of continuity. I argue – with reference mainly to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer – that, while the past may bequeath us some insights, its main legacy is the questions we ask of it. We do not simply receive history. We *make* it. We do so through a process of understanding that is inherently dialogical and that acknowledges the plurality of the human world.

### **The primacy of the question**

In mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century Milan an obscure professor of rhetoric named Giambattista Vico claimed to have uncovered ‘the order of all progress from its first origins’. He elaborated this ‘order of progress’ in terms of what he termed ‘the course of nations’ central to which was ‘the recurrence of human institutions’: ‘at first there were forests, then cultivated fields and huts, next small houses and villages, thence cities, and at last academies and philosophers’ (Vico,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I develop and elaborate ideas previously discussed in Chapter 3 (‘The Interpretive Tradition’) of Nixon (2012a, 32-45).

<sup>2</sup> See Carolyn Kreber’s discussion of ‘the inseparability of academic functions’ in Kreber (2013, 66-69).

2001, 15). Implicit in his argument is that these human institutions are historically situated, but that they constitute a category that is sustainable across history. Writing both within and against the Enlightenment that had illuminated the scientific potential of the natural world, Vico was exercised by the idea that the divinely ordained natural world can only be understood in the light of the human world that had evolved and was still evolving in time.

That world, he sought to show, could only be understood chronologically. History was, as Vico saw it, the key to worldly understanding. He set out to establish an understanding of the evolution of human societies that was as revolutionary in its time as Darwin's application of the notion of 'evolution' to the life sciences over a hundred years later. He lay the foundations of what we now categorise as 'the humanities' and of what is now practiced as 'anthropology', 'cultural studies', 'history', 'sociology', etc. – but never lost sight of the partiality of human understanding. 'There is always', as Edward Said (2004, 12) put it, 'something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge that Vico never loses sight of'.

However, the impact of Vico's *New Science* extends beyond 'the humanities'. The third edition of this work published in the year of his death – and 'thoroughly corrected revised, and expanded by the author' – shows how all human knowledge is historically located and therefore open to interpretation. The 'rules' of science, as developed by contemporaries such as Newton, were not – he implied – absolute and for all time. They were necessarily relative to their age and, as such, open to question. They were *interpretable*. Vico routed the tradition of hermeneutic enquiry – that was as old as Socrates – into the modern age of scientific enquiry. He was virtually unrecognised in his day and his work had little influence, but his long term impact is indisputable. The world is not entirely given, but made through our own understanding of it; and, as Marx went on to argue, if the world is what we make of it, then we can struggle to make of it a better world. Vico's great, sprawling, and (by our standards) unscholarly work is the hinge upon which the interpretive tradition turns towards historical consciousness.

Two insights in particular form the basis of that tradition. The first idea is that ***all understanding is always already interpretation***. In any attempt at interpretation we are interpreting that which has already been interpreted. The object of our interpretation is a construct that we inherit from the historical layering of countless prior interpretations and re-interpretations. There is no blank page of history upon which we can inscribe our entirely original understandings. History is a palimpsest of layered inscriptions and layered commentaries. The second insight follows from the first. If all understanding is always already interpretation, then ***the interpreter is always already part of what is being interpreted***. The subject that interprets is implicit in the object of interpretation. Notions of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' as the privileged criteria of rationality become increasingly difficult to justify in the light of this second insight.

These two insights were implicit – rather than explicit – in *New Science*. Vico was feeling his way towards a new world view that was still embryonic. He was fascinated by pre-history and how, prior to a chronological and sequential notion of time, people nevertheless located themselves historically. He understood that the past was another country which had to be understood on its own terms rather than on our terms. His formulation of the 'epochs of world history' into 'the ages of gods, heroes, and men' may seem strange and

esoteric to us, but in its time it was path breaking in its insistence on past epochs as interpretive constructs expressed in terms of mythology, political constitutions, and legal frameworks. History is what we make of it and what we make of it is inextricable from how we understand it. These were ideas that would inspire and inform the work of Karl Marx and James Joyce. At the time, however, Vico was still finding a language and form within which to express and elaborate them.

A third insight follows from the first two and was developed in particular by Gadamer.<sup>3</sup> If all understanding is always already interpretation and the interpreter always already part of what is being interpreted, then *all understanding necessarily involves an element of self-understanding*. Gadamer elaborated this insight with reference to the notion of ‘application’, which he understood as being implicit in all understanding from the moment of its inception. It is not that understanding is achieved and then applied, but that the application is intrinsic to the process of understanding: ‘in all understanding an application occurs, such that the person who is understanding is himself or herself *right there* in the understood meaning. He or she *belongs to* the subject-matter that he or she is understanding ... Everyone who understands something understands himself or herself in it’ (original emphases). (Gadamer, 2001, 47-48) The hermeneutical task, as Gadamer defines it, is to locate oneself within one’s own field – or, as he would put it, ‘tradition’ – of understanding.

The idea of ‘tradition’ is central to hermeneutics as developed by Gadamer: ‘we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions – none of this changes the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding’ (ibid, p. 45). Traditions pose questions in response to which we define ourselves and our own sense of purpose. The coherence of any tradition, as understood by Gadamer, can only be defined with reference to its intrinsic plurality and potential for innovation. Traditions are constantly evolving as new generations interpret and re-interpret them and, by so doing, modify and elaborate them. Traditions may initially present themselves to us as assertions, but, as Gadamer (1977, 11-13) insists, ‘no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way ... The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable’.

Central to the argument of Gadamer’s (2004) *Truth and Method* is what he calls ‘the hermeneutic priority of the question’ (pp. 356-371). ‘Understanding begins’, as he puts it, ‘when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics’ (p. 298). In becoming receptive to that which addresses us we are opening ourselves to the question it asks of us: ‘the essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open’ (p. 298) (original emphasis). Interpretation is the process whereby we receive the object of interpretation as a question and thereby gain ‘a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us’ (Gadamer, 2001, 42. Gadamer’s major contribution to the interpretive – or hermeneutic – tradition is his insight into the dialogical nature of all

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<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer was born on 11 February 1900 in Breslau (Germany) and died on 13 March 2002 in Heidelberg. (See Jean Grondin, 2003)

interpretive acts. The inherent structure of that tradition, he argues, is that of question and answer.<sup>4</sup>

### Understanding as dialogue

The interpretive tradition as understood and developed by Gadamer is not, therefore, a bounded and impermeable system, but an open and dialogical process that relies heavily on *phronesis* ('deliberation' or 'practical reasoning'). Gadamer insists that *phronesis*, rightly understood, is not simply a process of applying general laws, rules or precepts to specific cases and thereby involving technical knowledge of the means. His central insight was that this process of application necessarily involves – in addition to, and in conjunction with, knowledge of the means – knowledge of the ends. *Phronesis*, in other words, is not just a form of technical reasoning, but a mode of ethical reasoning requiring an understanding of the common good. 'It's clear', as Gadamer (2006, 35) put it towards the end of his life, 'that the knowledge of the means can't leave out of consideration the knowledge of the final end of every action'. Human understanding is, from this perspective, (1) a highly complex process of 'fusion' which (2) necessarily involves 'prejudices' or 'fore-meanings' and (3) cannot, given its inherent unpredictability, be reduced to 'method'.

The first of these elements relates to *the notion of 'the fusion of horizons'*. The idea of 'horizon' – as developed by Gadamer – relates directly to the importance he places in tradition as the legacy of the past to the future and the corresponding debt owed by the present to the past. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer provides a general explanation of how and why he is using the concept: 'The concept of "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in true proportion' (Gadamer, 2004, 304). The concept as applied by Gadamer invariably relates to our understanding of the past and of how we interpret the past with reference to the sources available to us. Gadamer's central point on this matter is that our horizons of understanding are never static: 'Every historian and philologist must reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which his understanding moves. Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events' (Gadamer, 2004, 366).

The meaning to be derived from any act of interpretation is always *in between*: between the interpreted and the interpreter, between the object of interpretation and the interpreter as subject, between different historical positions and perspectives. This means that the object of interpretation does not simply surrender its meaning as a form of divine revelation or authorial intention. Notwithstanding its historical roots in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics is in this respect both secular and humanist in its assumption that neither divine authority nor authorial intention provides the final arbiter in any interpretive act. There can be

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<sup>4</sup> A similar argument had previously been advanced by R. G. Collingwood in Chapter 5 ('Question and Answer') of his autobiography which was first published in 1939. (See Collingwood, 1978, 29-43) Fred Inglis's (2009) recent biography provides a readable and non-technical introduction to Collingwood's life and thought.

no appeal to a divine purpose that lies outside the historical course of events or to a human will that is immune to the consequences of those events.

The *in between* nature of human understanding also means that interpretation is not simply imposed – as imported theory or pre-specified criteria – by the interpreter on the object of interpretation. Although the world is always already interpreted, every act of interpretation is a new beginning occasioning a necessary shift in the interpreter’s self-understanding; or, as Joseph Dunne (1997, 121) puts it, ‘the interpreter’s horizon is already being stretched beyond itself, so that it is no longer the same horizon that it was independently of this encounter’. Because both interpreter and interpreted are located in the process of history – *in medias res* – the horizon of interpretation can never achieve permanent fixity. It changes constantly, just as our visual horizon varies with each step we take. Each interpretation is, therefore, both unique and open to reinterpretation – and ‘the fusion of horizons’ a process rather than an achieved state: ‘horizons are not rigid but mobile; they are in motion because our prejudgements are constantly put to the test’ (Gadamer, 2001, 48).

That brings us to the second element: namely, *the power of ‘prejudices’ or ‘fore-meanings’* in the constitution of understanding.<sup>5</sup> What the interpreter brings to the process of interpretation is vitally important. We understand the world in relation to what we bring to it by way of prior assumptions, preconceptions, and prejudices. We understand the world in and through our experience of the world. This perspective, as Gadamer (2004, 271) puts it, ‘involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices’. If we are an integral part of the world that we are seeking to understand, then we can ‘formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics as follows: what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?’ (p. 278) Prejudice – our historicity – is where interpretation begins: ‘the concept of “prejudice” is where we can start’ (p. 273). We bring with us to any attempt at interpretation prior values and assumptions that shape what and how we interpret.

Gadamer insists that this importing of ourselves into the process of understanding is a necessary component of that understanding. However, he also insists that we must be aware of what we are importing. Some of our prejudices may assist understanding, while others may distort or deny understanding. A large part of the hermeneutical task involves self-examination through the sifting of prejudices. To have trust in an interpretation is to trust that the interpreter has undergone this process of self-examination in respect of the values and assumptions that have shaped that interpretation. Similarly, to trust in one’s own interpretive capacity is not to have blind faith in one’s own convictions, but to trust in one’s own commitment to questioning those convictions. Trust is a necessary condition of understanding and understanding is a necessary condition of our being in the world. If we trusted nothing in this world of ours, then it would be a world beyond our understanding – and a world beyond our understanding is no longer our world.

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<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of ‘prejudice’ Gadamer starts from the structure of the German word – ‘das Vorurteil’ (‘pre-judice’) Duska Dobrosavljev’s (2002, 608) gloss on Gadamer’s usage of the term is helpful: ‘Prejudice is a soil where our judgement is grown’.

That is why Gadamer (1977, 8) argues that hermeneutics cannot be ‘restricted to a technique for avoiding misinterpretation’: misinterpretation through the application of inappropriate prejudices is to be avoided, but that avoidance does not in itself constitute understanding. I gain understanding not only by rejecting inappropriate prejudices, but by using other of my prejudices to connect with what I am seeking to understand. In explicit opposition to the scientific ideal of objectivity devoid of all prejudice, Gadamer insists on the productive power of prejudice. He rejects as alienating the mistrust of the subject – and of ‘subjectivity’ – that he sees as implicit in that ideal. He argues, instead, for the necessity of trusting to the subject – and to ‘subjectivity’ – in all understanding.

Gadamer is not arguing on behalf of relativism: an ethics of ‘anything goes’. Rather, he is arguing for an ethics of deliberation.<sup>6</sup> He is arguing on behalf of mutuality and reciprocity as the conditions necessary for whatever shared understanding is necessary for being together. Understanding implies – and requires as a necessary condition – recognition of both selfhood and difference and of the necessary relation between the two. To seek to understand is to adopt an ethical stance – not a moralistic or moralising stance, but a stance which affirms the central importance of personhood (of the other and of the self). If our world is shaped by our understanding of it, and if that understanding is conditional upon our meeting of minds, then understanding is nothing if not ethical. The originality of *Truth and Method* lies in its injunction to overcome what Gadamer sees as the alienation implicit in the ideal of prejudiceless objectivity: acknowledge the presence of yourself in your own understanding; recognise the other person’s understanding as central to your own understanding; develop your understanding as you would a dialogue. Above all, Gadamer insists, do not assume that human understanding can be reduced to method. That is not how human understanding works.

### **Beyond method**

This third element - *the irreducibility of human understanding to ‘method’* – is in part an attempt by Gadamer to distinguish ‘the humanities’ from ‘the sciences’. However, it is also an attempt to resist what he saw as the methodological appropriation of the former by the latter. At the time when Gadamer was writing, ‘method’ was in the ascendancy. The idea of ‘method’ was particularly associated with scientific enquiry, but the idea of there being a pre-ordained methodology of enquiry across disciplines and fields of study held sway. For enquiry to be taken seriously – whether within the natural, human, or social sciences – it had to be conducted systematically and in accordance with pre-specified methodological procedures.

In its most extreme form this scientific positivism – buttressed by the philosophical presuppositions of logical positivism or logical empiricism as it is sometimes termed – claimed that observational evidence is indispensable for knowledge of the world and that only when supported by such evidence could a belief that such and such is the case actually be the case (i.e. be ‘true’). A methodical approach to the selection, gathering and analysis of

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss the topic of deliberative ethics more fully in Nixon (2012b; 2012c; 2008, 32-46; 2004). See also Bruce Macfarlane (2004).

empirical ‘data’ – and to the inferential process whereby ‘findings’ were derived from this approach – was and to a large extent still is the means by which scientific enquiry gained legitimacy and public recognition. ‘Method’ would enable one to gather and analyse ‘data’ which would then provide knowledge in the form of ‘findings’. This became the dominant paradigm of scientific enquiry and exerted a strong influence on the social sciences generally and on social psychology in particular where it was supported by the presuppositions of behaviourism.

Gadamer’s starting point in *Truth and Method* is the ‘problem of method’ as he terms it. (Gadamer, 2004, 3-8). Understanding, he maintains, cannot be reduced to a method, although interpretive methods may contribute to our understanding. Gadamer does not deny that there are methods, but denies that such methods are constitutive of human understanding:

Of course there are methods and one must learn them and apply them ... As tools, methods are always good to have. But one must understand where these can be fruitfully used. Methodical sterility is a generally known phenomenon. ... What does the truly productive researcher do? ... Applying the method is what the person does who never finds out anything new, who never brings to light an interpretation that has revelatory power. No, it is not their mastery of methods but their hermeneutical imagination that distinguishes truly productive researchers. And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us. (Gadamer, 2004, 41-42)

Implicit in Gadamer’s critique of method is the idea that understanding involves self-formation and human flourishing that is open-ended in the extent and scope of its proliferation. The application of method, on the other hand, assumes a notion of rationality that seeks closure and predictability. Human understanding, argues Gadamer, must be true to the nature of humanity: a humanity that is necessarily fragile and vulnerable by virtue of its complex interconnectivities and its uncertain relation to the future. Gadamer saw this as a struggle between the human and natural sciences, with the latter imposing an inappropriate methodology on the latter: when inappropriately applied to the human world the scientific method insists upon an ideologically skewed version of humanity. Moreover, since the natural world is always already an interpreted world, the methodology derived from the natural sciences may be severely limited even when applied within its own traditional domain.

### **Worldly understanding**

What Gadamer calls ‘the hermeneutical imagination’ begins and ends in dialogue. His attempt to elaborate the dialogical nature of human understanding remains hugely important in an increasingly globalised world of complex inter-connectivity. Almost all the problems we now face are collective problems – problems, that is, that cannot be resolved by individuals working in isolation. The global inter-connectivity of human life means that working together towards collective solutions is much more difficult and much more crucial than it was in the past. Our networks of inter-connectivity are no longer knowable and

bounded communities, but boundless spaces the full communicative potential of which is unknowable.

Our big problems are all ‘bigger than self problems’<sup>7</sup> Such problems – economic, environmental, religious, and political – are, as Martha C. Nussbaum (2010, 79) argues, problems that require both collective and global understanding:

They have no hope of being solved unless people once distant come together and cooperate in ways they have not before. Think of global warming; decent trade regulations; the protection of the environment and animal species; the future of nuclear energy and the dangers of nuclear weapons; the movement of labor and the establishment of decent labor standards; the protection of children from trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced labor. All these can only truly be addressed by multinational discussions.

Such a list could, as Nussbaum points out, be extended almost indefinitely. The point is that our problems are increasingly not only collective problems, but globally collective problems requiring globally collective solutions: problems which at every level of impact – the individual, inter-personal, institutional, national, and international – are experienced globally. The collective solutions will emerge not from any totalising consensus, but from a willingness to reason together and in doing so to acknowledge and respect our differences. ‘People love homogeneity and are startled by difference’, Nussbaum (2008, 362) writes in her defence of religious equality; but it is the willingness to be ‘startled by difference’ that finally wins through in the long haul towards collective solutions: the collective, open-ended argument that constitutes deliberative democracy and locates within it mutual respect for our shared human dignity.

Globalisation presents us not only with economic, political and social challenges, but with a huge hermeneutical challenge: how, in a world of difference, are we to engage in conversations that are both constitutive of, and conditional upon, shared understanding? Indeed, the economic, political and social terms within which debates on globalisation are invariably couched may serve to obscure its impact on how we understand our world – and on how, in turn, that understanding impacts upon the economic, political and social construction of that world. How are we to learn to live together in a world of incommensurable difference? How are we to achieve understanding in – and for – the world?

Technical know-how (*techne*) and propositional knowledge derived from theory (*theoria*) are necessary resources for addressing such questions, but they are by no means sufficient. Indeed, as Gadamer seeks to show, they reveal a deficiency in the hermeneutical resources necessary for a worldly understanding of the world. Gadamer’s notion of understanding as intrinsically dialogical – and of *phronesis* as a distinct dialogical and conversational form – reminds us that in the sheer ordinariness of human understanding we possess the resources necessary not only for addressing those questions but for responding to them creatively and collectively. As Raymond Geuss (2010, 152) points out, ‘to speak of a

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<sup>7</sup> See WWF-UK (2010). Appendix two of this report provides a comprehensive review of the literature relating to this category of problem.

“conversation” is to be very explicit about the inherently social nature of what makes us human and ... directs attention away from trying to understand this activity as the activation of pre-given formal rules, or as aspiring to satisfy some antecedently given consensus of cogency, relevance, or accuracy’. That is, as Geuss acknowledges, an important part of the hermeneutical legacy bequeathed by Gadamer – and one which clearly has a bearing on the ends and purposes of higher education.

### A critical legacy

But it is only part of that legacy. Given Gadamer’s insistence on the significance of the question in the constitution of human understanding, a large part of his legacy also lies in the questions his work raises and the critiques it invites. This is crucial: Gadamer’s framework of ideas provides us with an authoritative basis from which to critique that framework. Notwithstanding the power of any such critique, it is important to recall that ‘answering back’ is one of the defining features of Gadamer’s hermeneutical emphasis on the primacy of the question. Gadamer invites – requires even – a critical response.

One such critique questions whether Gadamer’s understanding of the dialogical – and of *phronesis* as a distinct dialogical and conversational form – fully acknowledges the powerful plurality that underpins it. Indeed, does Gadamer’s avowedly liberal perspective lead to a denial of that plurality and the power implicit in that plurality? Is there an inherent exclusivity in Gadamer’s conceptualisation of *phronesis* that is unacknowledged – or repressed – within his conceptual framework? Is there a denial of radical difference? Such questions imply a critique of the critical capacity of Gadamer’s hermeneutics; its capacity, that is, to expose to critical scrutiny not only its own presuppositions, but also its own preconditions. Does Gadamer take sufficient account of the systematically distorted communication that constitutes ideology? Or is it the case that, as Jurgen Habermas argues, ‘Gadamer’s prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection’? (Habermas, 1977, 358)<sup>8</sup>

These questions invariably lead to a consideration of the historical setting of Gadamer’s life and work – and, in particular, Gadamer’s relation to Nazism and the post-war reconstruction of Germany within Europe. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer was not a member of the Nazi Party. Nevertheless, he did accommodate himself to Nazism sufficiently to remain in an academic post throughout the period that the Nazi regime controlled all the major institutions within Germany including the universities. Reflecting back on that period in an audio-taped conversation with Dorte von Westernhagen in or shortly before 1990, he said: ‘My cleverness [*Geschicktheit*] consisted in taking seriously as colleagues those who were Nazis but who were also at the same time genuine, rational scholars; avoiding, of course, political conversation’ (Gadamer, 2001, 129). Interviewed in 1993 by Christiane Gebron and Jonathan Ree on behalf of *Radical Philosophy*, he re-asserted his earlier uneasy relation to Nazism: ‘I think we could teach philosophising even under the Nazi system’ (Gadamer, 1995, 31). It is difficult not to infer from such statements that, for Gadamer, philosophically

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<sup>8</sup> Habermas’s major and highly influential critique of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* was published in German in 1970 and subsequently translated into English in 1977. (See Habermas, 1977.)

collegial discourse could be based on both a shallow and a narrow consensus – one that clearly avoided ‘political conversation’.<sup>9</sup>

Such an inference has a direct bearing on how we interpret Gadamer. If the sifting of prejudices and fore-meanings is central to his hermeneutics, then how does that sifting occur? Does, for example, the avoidance of ‘political conversation’ – albeit under exceptional circumstances – constitute an example of such sifting? Do we not sometimes – when, for example, refuting the claims of racist ideology – require the resources of ‘scientific method’ to help us in that task of sifting? If so, does Gadamer polarise humanistic and scientific modes of understanding in ways that may provide a rhetorical cutting edge to his argument, but are ultimately unhelpful in any attempt to gather the educative resources necessary for worldly understanding? The global citizens of the future will need not only to have a humanistic understanding of the world, but also a technological and scientific understanding of the way the world works.<sup>10</sup> This requirement has important implications for how we conceive of education at every level and – in particular – how we conceive of an all-through, comprehensive further and higher education curriculum.

It also has pedagogical implications with regard to how radically different viewpoints, opinions and perspectives might be mediated and negotiated. How inclusive of difference is the dialogical component of understanding as assumed by Gadamer? We live within and across microcosms of difference: differences of race, class and gender; differences of value and identity affiliation; difference of sexual orientation and life style. We all have membership of different communities: to reduce individuals to a unitary identity is to violate the complexity of that identity.<sup>11</sup> We carry difference around with us in our heads and in the relationships that sustain and form us. Reasoning together requires a responsive understanding of these worlds of difference that constitute the self and the relationship of self with others. A consensus that denies these differentials – and the agonistic element that binds and divides them – denies also its own democratic authenticity.<sup>12</sup> The pedagogical task is to find ways of recognising difference and valuing *dissensus*.<sup>13</sup> Given Gadamer’s limited emphasis on plurality his work may be of limited value in setting about this task.

That limitation is also evident in Gadamer’s notion of tradition, which he defines almost entirely in terms of Western culture. This raises a number of questions: Is Western culture a single tradition? Is it one tradition among many? How are national differences

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<sup>9</sup> Dmitri N. Shalin (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of the on-going debate on Gadamer’s relation to Nazism. See, also, Yvonne Sherratt (2013).

<sup>10</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that, as Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld (1938) showed in their remarkable *The Evolution of Physics*, science is also deeply interpretive: ‘Science is not just a collection of laws, a catalogue of unrelated facts. It is a creation of the human mind, with its freely invented ideas and concepts.’ (p. 310) See also Werner Heisenberg (2000).

<sup>11</sup> See Amartya Sen (2007) for a fuller elaboration of this argument regarding the violence imposed upon identity through the process of cultural homogenisation.

<sup>12</sup> See Chantal Mouffe (1993 and 2005) for a discussion of *agonistic* element in democratic discourse. ‘Democracy’, she argues, ‘is in peril not only when there is insufficient consensus and allegiance to the values it embodies, but also when its agonistic dynamic is hindered by an apparent excess of consensus, which usually masks a disquieting apathy’ (1993, 6).

<sup>13</sup> See Jacques Ranciere (2010 and 2011) on the democratic significance of *dissensus*.

accommodated within a tradition? Gadamer does not address these questions in any detail.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Said (2003, 332) argues, such questions are highly germane to any discussion of how interpretation operates in the context of global interconnectivity and disconnectivity: ‘debates today about “Frenchness” and “Englishness” in France and Britain respectively, or about Islam in countries such as Egypt and Pakistan, are part of that same interpretive process which involves the identities of different “others,” whether they be outsiders and refugees, or apostates and infidels’.

Fazal Rizvi (2009, 265) explores the pedagogical implications of this perspective with reference to what he calls ‘cosmopolitan learning’. Such learning, he argues, ‘involves pedagogic tasks that help students explore the criss-crossing of transnational circuits of communication, the flows of global capital and the cross-cutting of local, translocal and transnational social practices’. In so doing it ‘encourages students to consider the contested politics of place making, the social construction of power differentials and the dynamic processes relating to the formation of individual, group, national and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference’.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Bob Lingard (2008, 210) writes about the need to ‘deparochialize pedagogies’: ‘to construct and work towards pedagogies which make a difference in the distribution of knowledge and construction of identities and construction of global citizens who can work with and value difference’. Joelle Fanghanel (2012, 108-112) also addresses these issues with reference to academic practice and the globalisation of higher education.<sup>16</sup>

### **Why universities matter**

The interpretive tradition as presented in this paper highlights the dialogical nature of human understanding and the significance of *phronesis* as a distinct dialogical and conversational form. It also, however, highlights the need to relate *phronetic* forms of understanding with technological (*techne*) and explanatory (*theoria*) forms of reasoning. That in turn has implications for how we conceive of method. As Paul Ricoeur (1977, 329) puts it: ‘there are no rules for making good guesses. But there are methods for validating guesses.’ Good students need to be able to make good guesses, but they also need to be good at validating their guesses. They need, that is, to operate across different modes of understanding: to be able to deliberate and reason together, to have the technical know-how appropriate to particular tasks, and to find their way in and around different explanatory frameworks. In doing so, they need also to be able to recognise radical differences of received opinion, cultural values and beliefs, and intellectual background. Finally, they need to be able to relate

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<sup>14</sup> These questions were put to Gadamer in the 1993 interview conducted by Christiane Gehron and Jonathan Ree on behalf of *Radical Philosophy*, but received little in the way of detailed response. (See Gadamer, 1995, 32)

<sup>15</sup> Rizvi (2008) develops a similar argument.

<sup>16</sup> See also my discussion of ‘cosmopolitan imaginaries’ in Nixon (2011, 51-65)

to the complex inter-connectivities of a world in which the global saturates the local and the local permeates the global.<sup>17</sup>

What are required are *pedagogical processes* that provide opportunities for dialogical interaction between students and between students and teachers, *curricular frameworks* that give access to different modes of understanding and different ways of ensuring complementarity across the arts, humanities and sciences, and *institutional systems* that are inclusive, participatory and outward-looking. The risk is that at a time of shrinking resources – when universities are under threat and higher education is being increasingly deprived of public funding – such fundamental requirements will be seen as unrealistic accessories. The only acceptable utopias now, as Ronald Barnett (2012) reminds us, are ‘feasible utopias’. All others are deemed to be either nostalgic yearnings or idealistic longings. What is central to higher education – and to academic practice – thereby becomes marginalised and isolated. If utopian thinking is limited to what is feasible, then we all too easily find ourselves inhabiting an alienated and alienating dystopia. ‘We need’, as Jan McArthur (2013, 160) insists, ‘to resist our own acceptance of this isolation. We should cease to feel the need to apologize for academic work that shows its passionate motivations and committed values.’ We need to reaffirm both the central importance of human understanding within an increasingly decimated higher education sector and also the central importance of higher education within an increasingly stratified and fragmented university system.

The world view against which Gadamer was reacting was, as Richard Rorty (2000, 25) put it, ‘dominated by the thought that there is something nonhuman that human beings should try to live up to – a thought which today finds its most plausible expression in the scientific conception of culture’. Rorty went on to define Gadamer’s legacy in the following terms: ‘In a future Gadamerian culture, human beings would wish only to live up to one another ... The relationship between predecessor and successor would be conceived ... not as the power-laden relation of “overcoming” (*Überwindung*) but as the gentler relation of turning to new “purposes” (*Verwindung*).’ In such a culture, Rorty concludes, ‘Gadamer would be seen as one of the figures who helped give a new, more literal, sense to Holderlin’s line, “Ever since we are a conversation” (“Seit wir ein Gespräch sind”)’. He would also be seen, we might add, as one of the figures who helped envisage a more democratic, secular and cosmopolitan world.

### Coda

At the close of his great novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* Nadeem Aslam (2004) focuses the narrative lens on one of the least significant characters in the tragic events that constitute the substance of the novel. The character in question is an illegal immigrant who has unwittingly been caught up in the circumstances surrounding a so-called ‘honour’ killing of an unmarried couple: both of Pakistani descent, both of Muslim origin, both ambivalently placed in a society polarised between the clash of faiths and the clash between faith and secularisation.

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<sup>17</sup> Anatoly Oleksiyenko (2012) shows how what he terms a ‘glonacal’ (i.e. global-national-local) institutional partnership in Central Asia involving the governments of three diverse national regions – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – is seeking to promote and support such learning.

The novel is set in a town in the north of England at – or around – the turn of the century. The unnamed character has been in hiding, fearing deportation by the British authorities and revenge by one of the families at the centre of the tragedy. He is, the novel suggests, a weak man in an extremely vulnerable situation. But Aslam, who understands that one of the prime purposes of art is to show ordinary people how extraordinary they are, allows this minor nameless character to carry the full import of the novel:

But at dawn today he had told himself to go out into the world again. If a calamity is coming then where else would he rather be than with his fellow humans? What else is there but them? (p. 369)

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