Truth in the Time of the Demagogues:
Responding to Socio-cultural and Political Instabilities

Jon Nixon

*Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change.* (Edward W. Said, 1994, 75)

I Introduction
We live in an increasingly uncertain world. Ten years ago a global financial crisis shook the neoliberal consensus to its foundations, leaving much of the world precariously balanced between a discredited though still dominant neoliberal economic order and a populist and anti-liberal order that although as yet only emergent is nevertheless gaining not only influence and but also political power.¹ ‘We are entering’, as the historian Tony Judt (2010, 207) suggested in his final work, ‘upon a time of troubles’. How well or ill we fare in these troubled times will depend crucially on how universities define and assert their institutional priorities (section III); how academics translate those priorities into value-in-practice (section IV); and how, in turn, those values become crystallised into questions that have broader social and political relevance (section V). But, first, I locate these concerns within a brief discussion of what I see as a socio-cultural and political drift from a neo-liberal consensus towards an anti-liberal and populist press of opinion (section II).

II The time of the demagogues
Although broadcast more than twenty five years ago, the words quoted at the head of this paper continue to have resonance, particularly at a time when the notion of judgement implicit in Edward W. Said’s formulation – ‘carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right ones, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change’ – is under threat from the demagogues of both left and right.² Intellectuals, argues Said, are neither the advocates nor the custodians of any particular ideology, but, rather, the judicious critics of all ideologies. They bear witness to – and indeed represent – the possibility of ascertaining the truth in a world in which the boundary between truth and untruth is becoming increasingly blurred.

² ‘[T]he key distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism’, argue Speed and Mannion (2017, 250) ‘is not whether they ostracise, but whom they ostracise. As populism concerns only the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, who is considered to be the elite, or the people, depends on the political orientation of the populist.’
Three recent and major occurrences have contributed to the blurring of that boundary: the decision by the United Kingdom to exit the European Union\(^3\), the election of Donald Trump as the 45\(^{th}\) President of the USA on 20 January 2017, and the re-entry of far right political groupings into mainstream politics across Europe and the USA.\(^4\) These are, of course, disparate occurrences, each with its own causality and consequences. But each arose in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007/08 and the austerity measures adopted in response to that crisis.\(^5\) Each also involved a shift in the public discourse from reasoned argument and persuasion to assertion and populist ‘post-truth’ rhetoric:\(^6\) a shift that has been accompanied by the rise of a new wave of demagogues skilled in the use of that rhetoric on both traditional and social media platforms.

The political theorist Jan-Werner Müller (2016) has suggested that populism involves two related claims. First, populists claim that ‘the voice of the people’ takes precedent over all other sources of legitimate political authority: the judiciary, parliament and local government. The complexity of democratic sovereignty is thereby collapsed into a notion of ‘the sovereignty of the people’ – a notion that licenses populists to decry any attempt by the courts to pursue their constitutional function, to demand that elected members adhere to a popular mandate rather than exercise their independent judgements, and to inveigh against any sections of the free press that are critical of the supposed ‘will of the people’. The separation of powers – the constitutional cornerstone of liberal democracy – is thereby put at risk.

Second, populists claim to know what constitutes ‘the people’. Within the current political discourse ‘the people’ are variously defined as ‘ordinary people’, ‘decent people’ and even ‘real people’. ‘The people’, in other words, are invariably defined against ‘other people’, who by implication are not ‘ordinary’, not ‘decent’ and not ‘real’. It is these ‘other people’ who then become the targets – the scapegoats – of populist outrage: immigrants, refugees, religious minorities, recipients of state benefit, the unemployed … the list of potential scapegoats is endless. The point is to define ‘the people’ against some available ‘other’. Pluralism – the cultural heartbeat of liberal democracy – is thereby not only put at risk but denied.

To those two claims, a third claim should be added. Populists claim a monopoly on the truth regardless of its factual accuracy. The traditional distinction between deception and self-deceptions is not particularly helpful in this context. To tell an untruth with a view to deceiving others is one thing. To tell an untruth that we have wrongly persuaded ourselves is true is another. But to state an untruth that neither seeks to deceive others nor is a

---

\(^3\) The UK European Union membership referendum was held on 23 June 2016. On the basis of a slender majority of 51.9% to leave the EU, Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty was triggered on 29 March 2017 by the UK government with a view to exiting the EU within a two year period.

\(^4\) On Brexit and Trump, see Barnett (2017), Harding (2017) and Schier and Eberly (2018); on the re-entry of the far right, see Fekete (2018) and Neiwert (2017).

\(^5\) On austerity and its impact on higher education see, see Evans and McBride (2017), McBride and Evans (2017) and Nixon (2017b).

\(^6\) As defined by the Oxford English dictionary (which made it the 2016 international word of the year) post-truth ‘relates to or denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.
consequence of self-deception is something different again. It is an expression of power and control, demanding unconditional assent. It assumes that assent matters more than truth, that to unite around an untruth is justifiable, and that truth-telling no longer matters. What matter are so-called ‘alternative facts’, the rubbing of serious investigative journalism as ‘fake news’, the disparagement of ‘expertise’, and the linguistic obfuscation of meaning.\(^7\)

### III ‘Institutions of recognition’

The institutions of civil society stand as a defence against the normalising tendencies of populism and as a bulwark against the oligarchic tendencies of demagoguery. That is why demagogues and populists invariably seek to co-opt, denigrate, speak-over or sidestep the institutional frameworks and mechanisms that sustain democracy. Of course, institutions frequently fail to live up to these high expectations. All too often they ossify, become inward looking, surrender to the allurements of managerialism and corporatism, but their democratic potential for ensuring our social freedoms remains of paramount importance. Those who seek to realise that potential – or even, under unpropitious circumstances, hold onto the hope of doing so – are what the social philosopher Axel Honneth (2014) terms ‘institutions of recognition’: institutions that recognise difference, value dissensus over assent, and are (always and unconditionally) self-questioning.\(^8\)

Universities have historically aspired to be ‘institutions of recognition’. In practice, of course, they have colluded with privatisation, overseen a period of appalling professional atomisation, and entered a neoliberal market place in which competition and consumerism reign supreme. They have bowed over and over again to what the acclaimed author and theatre director Richard Eyre (2003) characterised as ‘the three horsemen of the new apocalypse – management, money and marketing’. But, historically, institutions of higher education – whether formally defined as universities, polytechnics or colleges – have always aspired a little higher. Their priorities have never quite accorded with the neoliberal agenda to which their over-paid vice-chancellors and managerial minions so assiduously adhere. It is those semi-dormant priorities, defining an alternative set of institutional responsibilities, which now urgently need to be re-affirmed, re-asserted and re-claimed.

The prime responsibility is to insist on the distinction between truth and untruth, verifiable belief and wishful thinking, fact and fantasy. ‘Our concern’, as the philosopher Bernard Williams (2002, 133) put it, ‘is with the virtues of truth’. Those virtues cannot be discovered ready made within a single ‘method’. As the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2001, 42) insisted, truth resides in our commitment to ‘the questionableness of something and what this requires of us’. Methods matter, but they cannot provide us with a ladder of perfection that inevitably leads us to ‘the truth’. The quest for truth is always a messy and muddled affair characterised by false starts, blind alleys, occasional insights, provisional

---

\(^7\) Mussolini was a master of the art of utilising linguistic obfuscation in the interests of fascism: ‘we allow ourselves the luxury of being aristocratic and democratic, conservative and progressives, reactionaries and revolutionaries, legals and illegals’. (Quoted in Jones, 2018, 10)

\(^8\) See, also, Honneth (1995) for a detailed discussion of his notion of ‘recognition’.
resolutions, and leaps of ‘the hermeneutical imagination’. Higher education exists to provide us with the resources necessary to engage in this lifelong process of truthfulness.

Second, universities are – as the term suggests – universal. They are by definition inclusive. ‘Universal’ means much more than – and, indeed, something very different from – the international marketization of higher education with a view to the recruitment of overseas students. It means developing what Feng Su and Margaret Wood (2017) call a ‘cosmopolitan outlook’: an outlook that circumscribes both the local and the global and perceives the interplay between the two. This is what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005, 213-271) terms ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ or ‘a tenable cosmopolitanism’: a cosmopolitanism that one can hold on to and that is grounded in the here and now. It resists insularity and any form of institutional belongingness that relies on exclusivity. It is responsible for, and committed to, the extension – and fusion – of our horizons of understanding.

Third, universities are, within the broader framework of civil society, spaces of dialogue and critical reflection: spaces that acknowledge as their raison d'être the need for dissent and disagreement within an agreed framework of deliberative endeavour. Universities are places where we learn how to disagree, and where disagreement forms the basis of rational discourse. Such discourse is impossible in the absence of mutual respect and the willingness to listen, which is why universities are also places of civility and civic engagement. It may be true that, as Walter Benjamin ([1950] 1969, 256) put it, ‘[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’, but it is also true that those same documents can enable us to construct a civic order that stands as a bulwark against future acts of barbarism.

Finally, universities provide us with a distinctive idiom: explorative, nuanced, self-questioning, tentative, uncertain, and forever in search of fine distinctions. It is an idiom – and a cast of mind – that has little or no place in a populist discourse in which the major protagonists are not only assured of certain certainties but assured of their right to assert those certainties. That idiom – the idiom of Socrates – has always fallen foul of regimes and political cultures that, even when democratic in name, obstruct the free interplay of ideas and arguments. Universities are responsible for encouraging and supporting this idiom, ensuring that it retains a presence in social and political discourse, and providing it with the wherewithal for present and future generations to speak truth to power. The university exists not only to remind us that uncertainty is intrinsic to the human condition, but to provide us with the wherewithal to dwell in uncertainty.

IV A profession of values
Institutions are only as good as the practices they sustain. In the case of universities those practices comprise – primarily – research, scholarship and teaching, each of which requires of its practitioners a particular value-orientation. An academic practitioner who had no regard for truthfulness, no respect of others, no sense of authenticity in respect of the truth, and no

---

9 I develop this argument more fully – and with specific reference to Gadamer – in my Hans-Georg *Gadamer: The Hermeneutical Imagination* (Nixon, 2017a)

10 I develop this theme more fully in my ‘Learning the language of deliberative democracy’ (Nixon, 2004)
magnanimity in sharing ideas and knowledge would be a very poor practitioner. Indeed, to ascribe the term researcher, scholar or teacher to such a person would be a gross misnomer. The values of truthfulness, respect, authenticity and magnanimity are, I would argue, intrinsic to the practices we associate with the academic life. To lead such a life is to learn what truthfulness, respect, authenticity and magnanimity mean in practice.  

**Truthfulness as quest**

Truthfulness is difficult, as John Donne in his *Satire III* written in the last decade of the 16th Century affirmed:

> …On a huge hill,  
> Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
> Reach her, about must and about must go …

The circumnavigations and reiterations are, Donne maintains, not just unfortunate aberrations, but necessary stations on the long uphill haul that constitutes truthfulness. But truthfulness – for academic practitioners – is also difficult because the institutional context within which they operate is not only inimical but hostile to the ‘about must, and about must go’ of teaching and learning. That context requires – demands – the pre-specification of outcomes, the adherence to externally imposed timeframes, and the acceptance of a competitive culture within which the production of outcomes and the adherence to externally imposed timeframes is of supreme importance.

**Mutuality of respect**

Attentiveness towards others – and honesty in our dealings one with another – are the hallmarks of mutual respect. But mutual respect – like truthfulness – is difficult in an increasingly managerialised and hierarchical institutional environment where deep inequalities relating to pay, conditions of service and contractual arrangements are endemic. The situation now is as bleak as – if not bleaker than – that described by Mark Considine (2006, 258) more than ten years ago:

> Scholarly domains are now infused with managerial values and goals, pedagogical actions are now dominated by organizational imperatives, and the life of the student is increasingly intersected by the priorities of work, finance, and future returns.

The managerialist ethos of many universities – and, indeed, of the higher education sector as a whole – militates against the very values of mutual respect upon which the practices of higher education are based.

---


12 For a hugely intelligent and highly accessible discussion of respect, see Sennett (2003)
Authenticity as a way of life

In his 1991 *Ethics of Authenticity* the philosopher Charles Taylor explained the notion of ‘authenticity’ in the following terms:

> The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions … Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter … Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God or something else matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial’.  

(Taylor, 1991, 40-41)

To define oneself ‘in a horizon of important questions’ and ‘against the background of things that matter’ is no easy task in any context, since it involves the constant questioning of what constitute the ‘important questions’ and the ‘things that matter’. In the context of post-truth politics – where the ‘important questions’ are taken for granted and the ‘things that matter’ bureaucratically defined – that task becomes not only increasingly difficult but also increasingly risky.  

Magnanimity and reaching out

In an environment characterised by fierce competition and institutional self-promotion the idea of ‘reaching out’ may seem utopian. But unless institutions and individuals do reach out they become stultified. Academic life when lived to the full requires a constant movement into the unknown. That movement into the unknown, as Said pointed out in an essay addressed directly to his fellow academics, is what is meant by academic freedom:

> You will have other things to think about and enjoy than merely yourself and your domain, and those other things are far more impressive, far more worthy of study and respect than self-adulation and uncritical self-appreciation. To join the academic world is therefore to enter a ceaseless quest for knowledge and freedom.  

(Said, 1996, 228)

This is not the freedom to spout whatever populist opinion comes into one’s head, but the freedom to explore what one does not understand and the freedom to report responsibly on the what one has – and, crucially, has not – understood. Without that willingness to reach out, higher education becomes trapped within its own ivory tower.

---

13 See, also, Kreber (2013) for a detailed and scholarly discussion of authenticity in relation to teaching within higher education.
V A time for questioning

Universities face a hard choice between two sharply contrasting visions of society and the place of higher education within it. The first is of a society that lacks cohesion and is economically sluggish and politically disengaged. It relies on subjects who know their place in society and are punctilious in the protection of their own private interests. It focuses on the past and views inequality as inevitable. At the bottom of this society are, as Joseph Stiglitz (2012, 289) shows, ‘millions of young people alienated and without hope’. Within this vision of society, higher education contributes to the private gain of those individuals who are in the fortunate position of being able to afford it. The public domain is thereby diminished to what Dan Hind (2010, 44) has described as a ‘public of private interests’.

The second vision is of a society that embraces difference and is economically resilient and democratically purposeful. It requires citizens who demand their place within the polity and consider their own interests to be inextricably entwined with the public interest. It focuses on alternative futures and challenges the legacy of inequality. It is a society where, as Stiglitz again puts it, ‘the gap between the haves and the have-nots has been narrowed, where there is a sense of shared destiny, [and] a common commitment to opportunity and fairness’ (p. 289). Within this vision, higher education contributes to the public good of society as a whole and is accessible to anyone able to benefit from it regardless of whether they can pay for it.

These contrasting visions – higher education as public good or private gain – raise questions not only about how higher education is funded but about who funds it and why. Increasingly, it is being funded through private investment. Is that what we – the public – want? It also raises questions about who should have access to and participate in higher education. As I have argued elsewhere, access and participation are historically skewed in favour of those with both economic and social capital. Again, is that what we – the public – want? Underlying these different sets of questions is the underlying question of what higher education is for. Is it to prepare young people for entry to a highly competitive job market or to become responsible and informed global citizens? Or is it – as seems most likely – a complex amalgam of the two which defies the timeworn distinction between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’?

Until we have had a much more open and public debate about what higher education is for it is difficult to see how we can develop a coherent response to the funding question, to questions relating to student access and participation, or to the question of what should be taught and how. Those involved in higher education – as researchers, teachers and scholars have a crucial role to play in shaping that debate. But we do so as public educators who – through our teaching and writing – engage with the public. As Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasised in his 1959 address to commemorate the 550th anniversary of the University of Leipzig, ‘only by means of the participation of the whole public may a university develop its

---

14 The literature on higher education and the public good is extensive, but the following are useful starting points: Bergan et. al., 2009; Calhoun, 2006; Filippakou and Williams, 2015; Leibowitz, 2012; Nixon, 2011; Walker, 2012
15 I rehearse and reference these arguments in my ‘Inequality and the erosion of the public good’ (Nixon, 2015)
true powers’ (Misgeld and Nicolson, 1992, 33). If institutional priorities need translating into professional values, those values need in turn to be translated into the mainstream of public debate and discourse.

Conclusion
Values do not come ready-made. They are acquired through hard practice and sometimes difficult experience. We only understand what matters by having made mistakes, blunders, embarrassing missteps, etc. We sail to our ethical endpoint by complicated side winds. Morality – how we treat one another – is all about second thoughts rather than primary impulses. Goodness is gained not granted. That is why we need to understand what is wrong with higher education and how we might morally reconfigure it and ethically reposition ourselves as public educators within it. In doing so we need to recall Said’s beautifully cadenced call to arms:

Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change.

References
Eyre, R. (2003) The BBC is one of the few things in Britain that works, The Guardian (27 September) p.22


**Contact:** nixonjon@live.co.uk. This paper is very much a work in progress – warts and all – so comments via email would be most welcome.