



Jon Nixon, Almantas Samalavicius

Higher education and its discontents

A conversation with Jon Nixon

The audit culture resulting from neoliberal policies has had a deleterious effect on all sectors of society, and no less so on the universities, says higher education expert Jon Nixon. Clearly, the logic of austerity constitutes an existential threat to the great humanistic traditions of scholarship.

Almantas Samalavicius: Neoliberal policies in the sphere of higher education implemented largely during the reign of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan now disguised in new forms continue to shape the goals of many contemporary European universities and have been directly or indirectly institutionalized to a certain degree by the so-called Bologna process. What is your attitude toward this ideological legacy and how did it affect the British system of higher education? And do you think this tendency will continue to take hold of higher education in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe?

Jon Nixon: We now have a vantage point from which to view in retrospect the last quarter of the twentieth century. It was — as you rightly suggest — the era during which the supposed "special relationship" between the UK and the US was particularly strong. Thatcherism — as it has come to be termed — fitted in with a US agenda that was increasingly neoliberal in its economic policies and increasingly neoconservative in its social policy. It created markets in areas where markets clearly don't work and encouraged monopolies in areas where markets need to be open and competitive in order to work. New Labour ditched the social conservatism of Thatcherism but retained and pushed forward many of its neoliberal economic policies.



2011 protests at McGill University in Québec, Canada. Photo: shahk. Source: [Flickr](#)

Indeed New Labour was, in the words of one of its chief architects, "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich as long as they pay their taxes". The irony is, of course, that New Labour had pursued economic deregulation with

such neoliberal zeal that a significant proportion of the "filthy rich" were able to avoid taxation by means that, although just within the law, were morally outrageous. Greed was the new good. Inequality kept on rising. Private debt mounted as those at the bottom struggled to survive and those in the middle scrambled to rise through the ranks of an increasingly consumer-driven society.

And then came the crash!

We are of course still living in the aftermath of 2007/2008. In ignorance or denial of the analyses developed by such eminent economists as Anthony Atkinson, Mark Blyth, Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Picketty, the UK government (together with the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund) has relentlessly pursued austerity policies that have undoubtedly increased inequality and arguably depressed demand. In spite of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's endlessly optimistic forecasts — economic growth in the UK remains sluggish and the much vaunted rise in employment masks an increase in low-paid casual labour and zero hours contracts. Personal debt is again rising as austerity measures designed to reduce the government's budget deficit are pushing more and more individuals and families to rely on personal loans.

The economic policies associated with austerity are underpinned by mechanisms of managerial control that were set in train during the hay day of Thatcherism. The public sector was relentlessly reined in by policies that focused on efficiency, cost effectiveness and accountability. The latter were ostensibly designed to increase public trust in public professionals, but — whether by malign intent or benign incompetence — had precisely the opposite effect. The audit culture rapidly morphed into a culture of suspicion, risk-aversion and mistrust. The professional classes that had constituted the cornerstone of the welfare state were now beleaguered by the increasingly powerful advocates of the small state. The ideal type was no longer the public-sector professional grounded in the ethics of public service, but the private-sector professional committed to institutional efficiency and the maximization of profit.

In the UK, higher education bought into this narrative hook, line and sinker. The administrative cadre within universities grew not only in numbers but in influence and power. Vice chancellors and principals became increasingly reliant on highly paid administrators responsible for determining funding allocations and strategic priorities. Members of the professoriate became increasingly enmeshed in managerial responsibilities and/or advancing their own academic careers in an increasingly competitive and institutionally stratified market place. In the meantime, early and mid-career academics were — and are — struggling in a workplace that is increasingly characterized by fixed-term contracts, professional atomization and economic insecurity.

In spite of the official emphasis on institutional diversity across the higher education sector, universities are becoming ever more conformist in their commitment to a one-size-fits-all notion of academic excellence: excellence driven, that is, by relentless competition in a zero-sum game of winners and losers. The Bologna process may — as your question seems to imply — have been implicit in this drift towards conformity. But given the UK's historic ambivalence towards Europe, the Bologna process has had less effect on UK institutions of higher education than on their counterparts within continental Europe — which probably says more about the isolationism of the UK than it

does about the Bologna process!

The key driver in the UK has been the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has recently been re-named the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This system — whereby research funds are allocated to institutions on the basis of their research output — has been in operation for over thirty years. It predates other world ranking systems and has had a major — and, in my view deleterious — impact on the higher education sector as a whole, on individual institutions and — crucially — on academic identity. It has increased competition within and between institutions, privileged research over teaching, encouraged narrow specialization, and imposed yet another layer of cumbersome, costly and time-consuming bureaucracy on an already over-managed higher education sector.

Will this tendency continue? Sadly, I see few reasons why not. The funding mechanisms are now such that success begets success: the more research funding an institution receives in any given round of the REF, the greater its chance of meeting the criteria of excellence in the next round. So, the universities at the top of the league tables secure their élite status, while those at the bottom risk closure or amalgamation — and the rest join the scramble to rise up the scale by a percentage point or two. Competition has become endemic in both the institutional culture of the higher education sector and the professional ethos of the academic community. What's required — as I argued in my 2008 *Towards the Virtuous University* — is a radical rethink of the moral bases of academic practice.

AS: A few years ago we witnessed a large wave of student unrest in many European countries triggered by students' protest in Vienna and then sweeping many other western societies, including the UK. It seems like the current generation of students and those who will continue to enter European universities are far less fascinated by the tendencies of privatization of higher education, the cult of effectiveness and the emphasis on institutional and individual competition as a key to success, so dear to many governments. What can be done to get out of this mental and ideological as well as political trap? Can anything be done at all?

JN: The mental and ideological trap is to take at face value the Thatcherite mantra — repeatedly intoned by successive governments intent upon pushing through austerity policies — that "there is no alternative": no alternative, that is, to cuts in public expenditure, to selling off public goods for private gain, and to the systematic destruction of the welfare state. The mental and ideological trap is also — as you quite rightly suggest — a political trap, since to accept that "there is no alternative" is a political dead-end. It is the point at which we relinquish any power we might have to shape our own futures; the point at which we deny our own political agency; the point at which *dissensus* dissolves into obedient assent and citizens become mere subjects. It is the complete absence of — and negation of — "the political".

Hannah Arendt characterized this apolitical state of being as one of *thoughtlessness*. By failing to "stop and think" — as she put it — we run the risk of becoming unthinking cogs in an inhuman machine. Thoughtlessness — she famously argued with reference to Eichmann — ends in the banality of an obedient state functionary responsible for and guilty of crimes against humanity. But she also drew attention to the dangers of purely abstract philosophical thought that bears no relation to practical reasoning or to "common sense" — to the shared meanings and understandings that bind us to

one another and allow for the possibility of collective action. Such pure thought, she argued, is deeply monological. That is why she refused to define herself — or be defined by others — as a philosopher. It is also why she at once revered and mistrusted Heidegger who was — for her — the supreme artist of the monological.

Thinking grounded in practical reasoning — what Aristotle termed *phronesis* — is on the other hand inescapably dialogical. Even when we are deep in our own personal thoughts we are involved in what Arendt called the "two-in-one" of thinking: the process whereby we represent other viewpoints, voices and perspectives. This "representative thinking", as she termed it, manifests itself most fully when we are thinking independently *as free agents* but in the company of others whom we treat *with equal respect*. Those others may be physically present or they may be part of what in my 2015 *Arendt and the Politics of Friendship* I referred to "the republic of friendship" — that associative space that encompasses those who, though absent, continue to speak to us through their writing or their art work or their remembered presence. Ideology is, she argued, diametrically opposed to this process of deliberation whereby we think together and move towards judgments that are informed by multiple perspectives and provide a basis for collective action.

So, can anything be done? Or — to rephrase your question — is there anything that I can do personally and professionally in the here and now? *As a citizen*, I can think — or at the very least resist thoughtlessness. I can make distinctions and not take the received consensus at face value. I can look at problems from different perspectives; inform myself by means of the most reliable sources available; and imagine situations radically different from my own. *As a teacher*, I can enable others to do likewise. I can encourage them to pose their own questions rather than just address the questions I or others pose; I can provide forums in which they are able to agree and disagree; I can direct them to sources of information that will help inform their agreements and clarify their disagreements. *As a colleague*, I can help create the conditions necessary for thoughtfulness. I can listen and learn. I can offer encouragement and — as and when appropriate — act as a friendly critic. I can acknowledge and value the diverse achievements of fellow academic practitioners.

All this may sound embarrassingly modest, but politics begins from where we are. Our agency is rooted in the here and now. There is, of course, an urgent need for a remaking of the polity: a citizenry that can think across boundaries and cultural divides to new possibilities and emergent futures. This new politics has found expression in a wide range of groupings, movements and networks: the *selmeya*, *sebbab* and *shehuda* of the Egyptian Arab Spring; the indignados of Spain that inspired the world-wide Occupy movement; the locally based circles or assemblies of Spain's Podemos party; the Greek networks that spawned the Syriza party; and within the UK the surge of grassroots support for a new community-based politics of the Left.

Many academics, intellectuals and students were — and are — actively involved in these various groupings, movements and networks. But — and I think this is the crucial point — we express our solidarity through the enactment of our politics at those precise points and in those specific sectors within which we ourselves are located. We start from where we are. The polity is not an abstract generality to which we adhere in principle, but a sphere of action that we realize in and through practice. We need to be — as I think Paulo Freire was — utopians of the here and now. Utopias are not "out there" waiting for us to find them. We make them through our everyday practice; we

build them brick by brick through our critical actions; we construct them through our life choices. They are always unfinished, incomplete and open to new possibilities.

If you have ever watched someone plough a field in the old way — with a horse and plough — you will know what I mean! The plough digs furrows which need to be straight and at the appropriate depth. The person handling the plough is focused on the furrow — its depth and straightness — but is also focused on the horse that is pulling the plough. If the person handling the plough loses concentration and begins to dream of the wonderful harvest that will ensue, then the furrows may no longer run true. Success depends upon the steady eye and the sheer perseverance of the one who ploughs the field — furrow by arduous furrow — in order to prepare the soil for the hoped-for but always uncertain harvest. Like the person who ploughs the field, we have to keep faith with reality.

AS: A few years ago the former president of Harvard Derek Bok published a wise and timely book focusing on some of the mainstream trends in American higher education — mainly on the issue of its commercialization, which has recently become a somewhat global phenomenon. Do you think that this current tendency of the commercialization and commodification of knowledge can be to a certain degree reversed? If so, what could be done by the governments and universities themselves in Europe and other countries?

JN: There are two "Europes". Europe 1 emerged from the ruins of World War II as a commitment to avoid the grave errors of the 1919 Versailles Treaty. It was a commitment to rebuild a unified Europe based on economic and political shared interest, to restore social cohesion at the national level through various form of state welfarism, and to ensure lasting peace after half a century of unprecedented carnage and cruelty. Europe 2 has been shaped by economic policies developed and enforced by the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (the so-called "Troika") with a view to imposing strict monetarist regimes — and more recently strict austerity regimes — on nation-states. Those regimes have been imposed regardless of the existing policies of democratically elected governments and have, as in the case of Greece, resulted in political mayhem.

These two "Europes" — historically layered and complicatedly interwoven — are mapped onto a complex geopolitical reality: a powerful western Europe with money and political clout; a heavily indebted southern Europe with little political leverage; a northern Europe that is something of an outrider in terms of economic policy but remains culturally and politically influential; and an increasingly significant eastern Europe that faces both East and West in its cultural and linguistic affinities. But what is perhaps most significant — and most disturbing — is that from North to South and East to West we see the re-emergence of populist far-right and in some cases openly fascist groups: a form of political populism that is totally at odds with the origins and outlook of Europe 1.

There is, then, a question as to how higher education should respond to this geopolitical reality. The impact of Europe 2 has been particularly marked in higher education, through its emphasis on the perceived need to raise its game in the world rankings — an emphasis that leads to increased competition and commercialization. From a Europe 2 perspective this is all for the good: institutions of higher education need to increase their research capacity and enhance their international profile. While acknowledging the need for

institutional recognition, I feel it would be a pity if Europe were to replicate the competitive and market-driven higher education systems that I associate with the UK and the USA. Mainland Europe could — and in my view should — lead the way in defining a new way of doing higher education within the context of a new and extremely fragile internationality.

At a more personal level I fear for the loss of that great humanistic tradition of scholarship that I see as one of the enduring legacies of Europe 1. I am thinking here of Erich Auerbach's reshaping of the European canon, of Karl Barth's revolutionary rethinking of Protestant theology, of Gadamer's reorientation of philosophical hermeneutics, and of Erwin Panofsky's reworking of the foundations of art history. These scholars were schooled in a tradition of humanistic scholarship that took words and images — and the contexts within which words and images are received — with the utmost seriousness. Each in his own way sought understanding as the only alternative to the barbarism of fascism. Could their great works of interpretive scholarship — with their acute sense of the particularity of specific texts and images and their huge historical sweep — survive the bureaucratic rigours of Europe 2?

But to return to your question! I'm not sure the current tendency of commercialization and commodification of knowledge can be *reversed*. But it can be *resisted*. I am thinking here less of structural reform than of collaboration at the level of practice. Talking across institutional and national boundaries is itself a kind of politics. That, for me, is what Europe 1 is all about: rebuilding the polity from the bottom up: by talking together, by recognizing one another's differences, by learning how to work through those differences; and, more simply, by understanding how to live together.

AS: In one of your books you have extensively and insightfully discussed university education as a public good. My own attempts to bring out the importance of this sense of a public good when discussing the future of higher education in my country was far better understood by some colleagues than by administrators of universities who continue to publicly profess other goals: the need of a "marriage" between universities and business enterprises, the marketability of knowledge, effective institutional performance and advance in global university rankings. Do you think that university education as a public good can win out in today's universities?

JN: My 2012 *Higher Education and the Public Good* was generally attacked on two fronts. There were those who claimed I was arguing for a return to some past "golden age" — as if the notion of higher education as a public good were so alien to common sense that any mention of it must denote some kind of regressive escapism. Then there were those who simply wrote my argument off as some kind of left-wing polemic. Both critiques came in the main from within the higher education policy research establishment — i.e. from established academics working in the narrow field of higher education policy and very often acting in an advisory capacity to policy makers developing and promoting the policy orientations and approaches I was criticizing. I make this point simply to highlight the fact that those orientations and approaches were not simply imposed from the outside, but — as you suggest — sometimes actively supported and defended from the inside.

When we begin to unpack what is meant by the term "public good" we can see why the idea of higher education being categorized in that way would be a stumbling block to those who have an interest in what you call "the marketability of knowledge". Economists define "a public good" as a product

or service that meets two criteria: the "non-rivalrous" criterion, whereby anyone can consume the product or service in question without reducing the amount available for others; and the "non-excludability" criterion, whereby no individual can be prevented from consuming that product or service whether or not he or she can pay for it. Public goods, in other words, are not acquired through competition and are free at the point of delivery. Both criteria are clearly problematic when considered in relation to higher education, since they challenge timeworn assumptions about *who* universities are for and *what* they are for.

The "non-rivalrous" criterion challenges the élitist assumption that knowledge is the preserve of a particular caste, class or clerisy and that any attempt to spread knowledge will necessarily mean spreading it thin. Since — or so the argument goes — distribution leads to dilution and dilution to dissolution, the spread of knowledge needs to be tightly controlled and enforced. Of course, control is no longer exercised primarily through dynastic succession or patronage (though both continue to play their part), but it is rigorously enforced through a competitive zero-sum game of winners and losers. Entry to higher education is deeply "rivalrous" with a handful of élite UK universities accepting a hugely disproportionate number of applicants from families with the financial resources necessary to pay for the private schooling of their sons and daughters. The vast majority of students who have been schooled within the state system — some of whom may have equivalent academic qualifications to their privately educated counterparts — are thereby excluded. This is quite clearly a scandalous state of affairs.

The "non-excludability" criterion is on the face of it more complicated in terms of its application to higher education. Not everyone, it is argued, would necessarily benefit from higher education, so the notion of "non-excludability" might be considered inapplicable. But who is to decide who would and would not benefit? And what implications would any such decision have for how we conceive of higher education? Such questions invite us to consider what a fully comprehensive and inclusive system of higher education might look like: what it would look like if, instead of asking "Who would benefit from higher education as currently constituted?" we asked "What would higher education look like if everyone were able to benefit from it?" What would it look like, for example, if we jettisoned the false dichotomy of "academic versus vocational" — or abandoned the idea of the university as the exclusive or even the main institutional locus of higher education?

If we began to address these kinds of questions we could I believe begin to reclaim higher education as a public good. But we would need to broaden our definition of higher education and its institutional base. We would need to develop a common but differentiated undergraduate curriculum that introduced students to a wide range of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary perspectives. Universities would remain supremely important, but other institutional settings would also figure in a broader network of higher education provision: arts centres, care homes, community centres, outdoor centres, places of work, prisons, youth centres, etc. Higher education could then cater for the diverse educational needs — academic *and* vocational — of a pluralist society increasingly reliant on the creativity, flexibility and resilience of the millennial generation. We would also need to ensure — through pre-distributive and/or redistributive economic measures — that this comprehensive system of higher education was publically funded.

Within the current climate the scenario I have sketched seems at best wishful thinking and at worst pie-in-the-sky. But that is only the case because of policy decisions taken by successive governments and — as mentioned in response to your previous question — justified on the grounds that "there is no alternative". Well, there are alternatives! The problem is that we fail to imagine them — fail to name them and declare them. And in failing to do so, we fail future generations. It is significant that the Arab Spring originated in countries with a high proportion of people under 25 years of age — in Tunisia this group comprises 42 per cent of the overall population, in Egypt 52 per cent and in Bahrain 44 per cent. Here young people constituted a critical mass and rejected the status quo imposed by their elders. They demanded that *their* futures be taken seriously — and, in doing so, they gave the lie to those who insisted that "there is no alternative".

AS: Having a rich experience as a university teacher, researcher and administrator and last but not least knowing a number of non-European academic contexts, what is your vision of the future of higher education in this century? What challenges to higher education are will continue to be most important having in the mind extreme complexities and controversies of our era when faith in the prospects of further globalization and westernization is lost and yet globalization remains a common denominator?

JN: Almost all the problems we now face are collective problems: bigger-than-self-problems that require both collective and global understanding: 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 labour and the establishment of decent labour standards, the protection of children from trafficking, sexual abuse, forced labour, etc. These collective problems require collective solutions and can only be addressed through a process of collective deliberation. Globalization, in other words, presents us not only with economic, political and social challenges, but with a *hermeneutical challenge*: a challenge, that is, to our understanding. That hermeneutical challenge in turn presents us with a *pedagogical challenge*: how, in a world of seemingly incommensurable difference, are we to achieve shared understanding?

In my 2012 *Interpretive Pedagogies for Higher Education* I explored this interface between hermeneutics and pedagogy from a Gadamerian perspective. As you know Gadamer's life spanned the entire twentieth century. Born in 1900 he lived till 2004, thereby surviving the First World War, the rise of Nazism, the Second World War and the Cold War. His 1960 magnum opus — *Truth and Method* — reshaped the way in which we conceive of understanding and established hermeneutics as a major philosophical field. His applied hermeneutics — as developed in his later years — has had a significant influence not only within the field of educational practice but also among health professionals and within the legal profession.

Three big ideas shaped Gadamer's thinking: the idea of "the fusion of horizons" — how understanding always entails an element of mutuality and reciprocity; the notion of what he calls "the power of prejudice" — how we import ourselves into any attempt at understanding; and the idea that understanding is always "beyond method" — that it involves what he called "the hermeneutical imagination". Threading through these ideas is his insistence on what he calls "the primacy of the question": an emphasis that takes us beyond "the Socratic method" as a pedagogical tool and towards a theory of learning that places the learner as questioner at the heart of the

educational project. Understanding, he argues, lies in the formulation and articulation of the question.

So, what might higher education look like if it were to be responsive to these Gadamerian themes? It would recognize students as questioning agents and enable them to grasp for themselves what he called the unique "questionableness of something". It would encourage and acknowledge reciprocity and mutuality, listening and recognition, and the willingness to maintain openness rather than closure. It would also acknowledge both the provisionality and boundlessness of human understanding and insist upon understanding as always-not-yet-finished. Finally, it would acknowledge the importance of intuition and inference, celebrate the surprising and the unexpected, and encourage speculation and risk-taking.

Let me return to our guide and mentor, Aristotle. He reminded us of the importance of *phronesis*: of thinking together in situations characterized by muddle and radical differences of viewpoint and under circumstances which require difficult decisions to be made but where the outcomes of those decisions are indeterminate. The world needs future generations who can think their way through such situations with a view to defining the common good. Of course, the common good is always — from a purely individualistic perspective — a kind of second best. But — if pursued with respect for difference and the due representation of minority voices — it can guarantee our survival as a people. It then becomes not only the common good, but the supreme good.

We must trust in our capacity to think together, learn together and pool our common resources. But above all we must trust in the capacity of future generations to do likewise and ensure that they have the functioning capabilities to live together in difference. That is the task of the public educator — whether we be activists, artists, teachers, writers or engaged citizens.

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