Populism and the Academy:
On the 'wrong side' of history?

3rd Annual Worldviews Lecture
Toronto - April 5, 2017

By: Dr. Peter Scott

Introduction

1. Thank you very much for the invitation to give the 2017 'Worldviews' lecture. It was an honour to receive this invitation- which makes it all the more embarrassing that I have to start with an apology. As you can see, I am not here in Toronto but delivering this lecture 'virtually' from London on the other side of the Atlantic. The reason for this is health issues which I won't bore you with. Once, of course, we thought this might become the routine way in which conversations of all kinds would take place, from family chats to formal lectures like this. We would all stay at home but be free to wander the world. Shares in airlines and hotels would plummet but so too would CO2 emissions. As we know, it hasn't turned out like that - except perhaps for family chats. Political leaders still jet round the world for contrived summits that are often little more than photo opportunities. Professors still turn up to give lectures in the flesh, making (we hope) more considered contributions - unless, as in my case, other factors intervene. The webinar is very much the poor relation of the seminar. The desperate and dispossessed still feel they have to entrust their lives to leaky boats in the Mediterranean or the Timor sea. That particular future, of 'virtual' rather than physical encounters, seems to be have been indefinitely postponed.

2. Or has it? Here I am not thinking of the Massive Open Online Courses many universities are busy developing, or the campus-based online learning systems that allow students to access more and more course materials from their dorms - although these kinds of 'virtual' learning experiences are becoming increasingly important in higher education. Instead I am thinking of something that is much closer to the theme of my lecture today.

   - In an age when every click we make, every preference we appear to have (however ephemeral), is being harvested by sophisticated data analytics - and being used not just commercially ('you bought this, you might like that'), but also politically, to pander to and perhaps pervert our political choices;

   - In an age in which the President of the United States governs through his Twitter account and campaigners for the UK to leave the European Union last summer promised £350 million more (a week!) could then be spent on the health service, knowing it to be a lie;

   - In an age in which all politicians (even the most sober and serious) and political parties have to become 'brands' sending out simple alluring messages;

   - In an age in which there are all kinds of 'facts', including 'alternative facts' (whether trivial about the size of the crowd at Presidential inaugurations or serious like denial of the Holocaust) which can never be suppressed by 'reality checks' that always limp behind;

   - In an age in which paranoia, and even hate, are accorded almost the same attention and respect as the products of the most careful science

- surely we have to recognise that there are entirely new challenges to our democratic political culture that, for all the smoke and mirrors, heat and smoke of traditional politics, depends ultimately on some kind of civilised discourse?

3. Optimists, and maybe realists too, argue that we will just have to master this new culture of instant, unexamined, exchanges in which the political and personal are hopelessly confused - by learning to play the game better than the enemies of democracy, and also perhaps by curbing the secret power of the data harvesters and opinion distorters. They - we perhaps - believe we can and will come through the other side. Trump will be trumped, although that still leaves behind uncomfortable thoughts about how these supposedly unthinkable events, such as Donald Trump becoming President of the United States or the UK leaving the European Union (and probably breaking up a much older and more famous Union in the process) ever came about in the first place. Pessimists have much gloomier thoughts, which - frighteningly - may even run to various forms of collaboration with, or accommodation to, these new forces of so-called 'populism'. In their darkest moments they may even worry they are witnessing the decline and fall of civilised discourse, the death of *logos* (and all it represents). Maybe they should try to cheer up by reminding themselves that, while Tweets are indeed short, so too - by most standards - was the Gettysburg address.

4. And the challenge, or to speak more plainly threat, is perhaps even greater to the academy, the world of higher education and and science, that is my theme today. Suddenly we seem to have ended up on the 'wrong side' of history. Even more than a revolt of those left behind economically, in scarred 'rust belt' post-industrial landscapes, the new 'populism' seems to be revolt of those who have been left behind educationally, not just the old who in their time were denied access to anything beyond basic education but the young and middle-aged still excluded from today's mass higher education systems. And the leaders of this 'revolt', the usual right-wing suspects of course not actually the left behind, are directly targeting the academy, the home of the despised 'experts', 'cosmopolitans', and 'elites'.

SLIDE

5. My argument today is, first, that we should not exaggerate the strength of this new 'populism' and we certainly should not allow ourselves to be spooked by it, but we also need to acknowledge the force of (parts of) its critique - the better to counter it. However, second and more important, instead of bowing to this wind, we should move forward to complete the project begun half a century (or much longer ago) when we first began to treat access to higher education as a key component of citizenship in democratic societies. This is not the time to retreat back into an ivory tower, even if it is disguised in the new clothes of the 'world-class university'. As Danton told the National Assembly in Paris in 1792; 'de *l'audace, encore de l'audace et toujours de l'audace*'.

SLIDE

Trump, Brexit - and the new 'populism'

SLIDE

6. But the first thing we have to do is to pin down, to define, what we mean by 'populism'. There is clearly a danger that the now dominant media narrative will run out of control. I know, having been a journalist, that the 'story' once it has been fixed is very difficult to shift. So lots of, perhaps different, things have been bundled together under the label of 'populism'. I wonder how much Vladimir Putin with his carefully balanced package of post-Soviet great-power nostalgia and social conservatism, enthusiastically supported of course by the Orthodox church, really has in common with the luxury bling of Trump's maverick (but - very - pro-business) right, and his back-woods and rust-belt supporters - or to the neo-Ottomanism of Erdogan in Turkey, let alone anti-immigrant and quasi-racist parties in Europe such as UKIP in the UK, the National Front in France, the Alternative for Germany or even the authoritarian

Governments of Poland or Hungary, or the President of the Philippines, or Prime Minister Modi in India. So the list goes on - perhaps to eventual absurdity. We need to keep a tighter grip on the definition of 'populism', and so the threat it poses to established political institutions (and the academy).

SLIDE

7. The same applies to the various strands within so-called 'populism'. The essential problem is that free-market neoliberalism, which (maybe like Communism once did) offers a 'single path' for development, may be in retreat - or, any rate, under pressure - but it is still very much in power. The centre-left, which in the days of the big / benign welfare state, offered at least some check on the power of the market, is seen by many as having 'passed over the dark side'. Electoral logic appeared to dictate 'if you can't beat them, join them'. The enfeeblement of social democracy, in its classic form, is perhaps one of the most significant phenomena of the 21st century. This has given rise to a dissonance between mainstream social attitudes, which in most countries continue to value education, health, communities (in other words, rather 'leftish' causes), and the mainstream political consensus, which has moved markedly to the right. As long as neoliberalism appeared to be delivering the goods, in terms of sustained economic growth, people put up with this contradiction. But since 2008 that fragile 'social contract' has been broken. We are now living with the consequences, and the backlash.

8. However, so-called 'populism' is not only thing but many.

   - One element is certainly a reaction to the increasing gulf between haves and have-nots, in terms of economic resources. Disparities of wealth, as the French economist Thomas Picketty has authoritatively demonstrated, are now as great as they were in the 'gilded age' (for some) of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The haves pay themselves more and more, and low-tax regimes now enabled renewed inter-generational accumulation of wealth (which is why Picketty was right to focus on 'capital' in the title of his main book). At the same time the notions of 'meritocracy' and 'social mobility', which provided at least some cover, and legitimacy, for the wealthy, have been radically weakened. They are no longer Robert Reich's high-grade 'symbolic workers' drawn from a widening social spectrum. At the same time the plight of the have-nots has worsened as traditional manufacturing and services jobs have either 'out-sourced' in- or out-of-country, or automated, and the safety net once provided by the welfare state has been weakened or removed

   - But, alongside the social strains produced by this growing disparity of economic wealth, there is a complex bundle of strands linked to ideas of 'identity' and 'patriotism'. Sometimes these take essentially benign forms, like the drive towards independence in Scotland or Catalonia (the former, at any rate, largely driven by the desire to maintain a more traditional 'social-democratic' form of society). Sometimes, much less benignly, they intersect with economic grievances - for example, when worries about multiculturalism are magnified by fears that immigrants are taking our jobs - which can fuel racism. They also intersect with economic grievances to erode faith in established political institutions, including those of the democratic state. And this is a global phenomenon, truly another face of globalisation, as geopolitical conflict breeds resistance, often coalescing round perceived threats to 'identity' - so Isis and Al Qaeda are part of this mix. A fourth strand here, and one that more directly affects higher education, is these 'identity' worries, inevitably emotional and often visceral, sit uneasily alongside the practice of evidence-based rationality. Beth Simone Novek, of Yale Law School and NYU's Governance Lab, has made this explicit connection: 'The Brexit vote and the Trump campaign, as well as the success of populist candidates around the world, highlight a distrust of traditional government institutions that is manifesting itself as a dislike of credentialed expertise'.

SLIDE

9. I draw two conclusions from all this. The first is that 'populism' contains many strands, and there are risks in lumping them altogether into a single concerted movement. As I said earlier, we should not be seduced by a dominant media narrative based on shallow analysis. My second conclusion is that we should allow ourselves to be 'spooked' by this narrative - first, for the reason I have just given (There are many components of 'populism', some of which may indeed implicate us in higher education, but others which have nothing much to do with higher education); but, secondly, because we need to retain a sense of perspective. Donald Trump did not 'win' the US Presidential election; he 'lost' it by 3 million votes. He is only President because the Americans have retained their archaic Electoral College. The Brexit vote in the UK was effectively a tie - 51.9 to leave the EU and 48.1 to remain with all the major cities, along with Scotland and Northern Ireland in the 'remain' camp. And the EU will survive without us. Geert Wilders comprehensively lost the recent election in the Netherlands. Emmanuel Macron, or just possibly François Fillon, will be the next President of France, not Martine Le Pen. The forthcoming German election will be a contest between the centre-right, Angela Merkel, and centre-left, Martin Schulz of the revived Social Democrats. The risk is not a tsunami wave of 'populism' but that we will be 'spooked' and do their work for them, by sacrificing our beliefs and principles. Let's not lose out heads over all of this. We may have lost or two recent crucial battles, but we are winning the war.

SLIDE

The challenge to the academy

SLIDE

SLIDE

10. Much as I would like to continue in this vain, and talk about 'populism' at large, my focus in this lecture is on higher education. The most important factor in determining whether someone voted for Trump or Clinton in the US, or voted to leave or remain in the EU in the UK, was level of education - more important than gender, occupation or even age. In the US two-thirds of those without college degrees voted for Trump. In the UK three-quarters of those without post-school qualifications voted for Brexit, while it was almost exactly the other way round with graduates. And this is not confined to the US and UK. A recent 12-nation study across Europe found that almost 60 percent of those defined as having 'low' educational qualifications had broadly Euro-sceptic views, compared with less than 30 percent of those with 'high' educational qualifications. On the face to it, experience of higher education inclines people to be more 'liberal'. So, maybe, to the extent 'liberals' are on the defensive, higher education can be characterised as being on the 'wrong side' of history.

11. So we need to take the charge-sheet against the academy seriously, and to find ways in which colleges and universities can regain any popular trust they may have lost. In this second part of my lecture I would like to list, and answer, the charges. In the final part I will consider what we should do next to rebuild, and strengthen, trust in higher education.

SLIDE

SLIDE

12. The main charge is that almost half a century of mass expansion has predominantly benefited the middle classes, leading to almost universal participation by students from more socially advantaged backgrounds while for students from disadvantaged backgrounds access to higher education remains a rationed privilege. For example, in Scotland where I have just taken on a new role as Commissioner for Fair Access, an 18-year-old in the 20 percent most deprived areas is four times less likely to go on to higher education than an 18-year-old in the 20 percent least deprived area - and that disparity is reproduced across the world (a bit less in Scandinavia, a bit more in some other parts of Europe). This stubborn access gap is even

more pronounced in the case of elite universities, so (too?) often the focus of national pride as 'world-class' universities, a discourse I want to return to. Of course, once again, a sense of perspective is needed. This first charge against higher education is just one strand in a wider right-wing assault on the welfare state, and tax-supported public services - that it is the haves who have benefited at the expense of the have-nots. Ironically the reduction in direct and progressive taxation, and its replacement by indirect and regressive (and even stealth) taxes, which the same right-wingers have argued for, has sharpened this critique.

13. In the case of higher education there are powerful counter-arguments:

   • First, definitions of 'middle class' and 'working class' have changed. As a result of far reaching shifts in economic structures, and occupational patterns, the former has grown as a proportion of the population and the latter, certainly in its classic heavy-industry (now, sadly, 'rust belt') proletarian form, has declined - although there are alarming signs of the growth of the new precariat in the so-called 'gig economy' (many of whom may be college graduates). So it is hardly surprising that today's much more open higher education systems appear to be dominated still by the 'middle class', broadly defined - leaving aside, of course, the role higher education has played in (upward) social mobility, surely a beneficial outcome;

   • Second, although the access gap remains, in absolute terms far more students come from less privileged backgrounds. Millions more have been added to the college 'franchise'. Levels of participation by the least privileged far exceed the levels of the most privileged before the age of mass higher education dawned;

   • Third, some previously disadvantaged groups have made spectacular gains - for example, some (but nor all) ethnic and cultural minorities and, most decisively and visibly, women (although that has fuelled another complaint, that middle-class women have crowded out working-class men). Of course, true equality of opportunity remains to be achieved. Minority students tend to be concentrated in lower-status institutions, and female students are also concentrated in particular subjects (and, more arguably, as a result excluded from some elite positions and professions).

14. But the thesis that the development of mass higher education has been a socially regressive phenomenon, is plain false. Of course, there is a far bigger 'elephant in the room', the growing inequality certainly in terms of income differentials produced that has been produced by the erosion of higher-tax welfare states, deregulation and privatisation since the 1980s, which I mentioned earlier in relation to the work of Thomas Picketty. The same right-wing critics who complain about the alleged elitism of higher education, of course, enthusiastically support these anti-state policies. So they can hardly complain about their inevitably divisive effects, whether in terms of health outcomes and school attainment or the pattern of students in higher education. The available evidence suggests that the wider availability of higher education, as a result of mass expansion, has mitigated this rise in social inequality. But colleges and universities inevitably reflect wider social, economic and cultural trends. They cannot reverse these trends unaided.

SLIDE

15. Two other charges are levelled at the academy by the Trumpists, Brexiters and their fellow travellers around the globe. The first is that the expansion of higher education has contributed to the growth of what they like to call an 'expertocracy', which dominates public debate (and so stifles contrary voices) on a whole range of issues from climate change to women's rights. By default nearly all of these 'experts' are college graduates and many are professors. It is difficult to know how seriously to take this charge. It is an old complaint, the rage of aristocratic privilege against the career open to the talents on the one hand and on the other age-old resentment of the intrusion of the bureaucratic state, operating on rational (or 'expert')

principles, into the customary life of traditional (and very unequal) communities. The professional society has been a'building since the middle of the nineteenth century. Rather more recently in the mid-20th century Milovan Djilas, the Yugoslav leader turned dissident, complained that postwar Communist regimes in central and eastern Europe were creating a 'New Class'. Mass higher education may have created a new 'graduate class' in a similar mode. I believe we need to think very seriously about this. If we believe, as I do, that some experience of higher education is close to being a human right, and is certainly a prerequisite for full participation in a democratic society and advanced economy, we need to worry about those who remain excluded, or exclude themselves.

16. And, there is another twist. Universities are also implicated as the producers of much of the science on which advanced, and sometimes disruptive, technologies are based. The historical responsibilities of scholars to uncover 'truths' that conflict with received wisdom, and of scientists to 'think the unthinkable', have always been disturbing to some - even if their fear-and-loathing is now sometimes bolstered by another charge, that humanities scholars and social scientists in particular, by emphasising the importance of context, are surrendering to relativism (leading ultimately to the belief that - almost - 'anything goes'). A more solid argument is that some new technologies are reshaping lives, and even personal relationships, in radical, and not always immediately welcome, ways. Social media are clearly an example of a disruptive phenomenon, although Donald Trump has shown no more willingness to abandon his Twitter account as a primary channel of Presidential government any more than the students are willing to abandon social media as learning tools (encouraged by us). The advance of the platform, or gig, economy is another example of a disruptive technology. Perhaps Uber is the most high-profile of these web / app-based 'platforms'— but there are many more.

SLIDE

17. The third charge is that the academy is spreading 'cosmopolitanism', which for these critics appears to be a mixture of the re-heated 'culture wars' of the last century (especially in the US) but also new fears about immigration, mass flows of refugees and 'terrorism', which (as I said earlier) have brought on a crisis of 'identity'. To this the academy can only plead guilty. Universities are vibrant, increasingly multi-cultural, places typically at the heart of Richard Florida's 'creative cities' where economic dynamism, technological innovation and social and cultural experimentation fruitfully coexist. Perhaps some of the more tokenistic displays of 'political correctness', such as the re-naming of university buildings or the removal of statues of long forgotten men, reflect limited credit on their campus-based campaigners. These campaigns, perhaps, are another example of 21st-century 'identity' politics - and, as such, some critics claim they have much in common with the 'culture wars' waged by the Right. They tend to focus on symbols rather than substance. But, overwhelmingly, the academy has nothing to apologise for.

SLIDE

What is to be done?

SLIDE

18. How to respond to this charge sheet? The first response must be to refuse to be spooked by the hypocritical allegations of elitism levelled by these ultra-conservatives masquerading as populists, and not to do their work for them by apologising and abandoning the high ground currently occupied by the academy. Modern higher education systems play a key role in the civic, and economic, emancipation of millions around the world. Democratic societies, for all the weaknesses revealed by the (hopefully, transitory) triumph of Trump and Brexit, cannot function without a well-educated citizenry. The choices we face are difficult and complex. Beware so-called populists peddling easy and simple ones. Similarly the success of our economies, which have generated historically unparalleled wealth (however unequally it may

be distributed), depends on the 'experts' so despised by the alt-right and, more broadly, on the skills of an increasingly well educated workforce. The academy has been a key agent in both processes, linked of course - individual and social emancipation and economic betterment. The development of more open higher education systems has been among the most powerful social transformations of the past half century.

19. But I believe a second response is also needed. There is enough of a sliver of truth in the allegation that the academy has sold out to powerful corporate interests, especially in some areas of research, and that by incessantly talking up 'world-class' universities, inevitably perhaps enrolling predominantly students from socially privileged groups we have (however unwittingly) talked down the equal, or greater, need to promote ever-wider access to the widest possible populations, to establish an equivalent sliver of nagging doubt about the 21st-century university's moral compass. Only a sliver, of course. For all the research funded by big pharma, energy companies or the military there is an equivalent or greater quantity of research on progressive social interventions, new legal principles and environmental agendas; and elite universities are under constant pressure to open their doors to a more diverse student body. But one of the lessons of 21st-century politics, manipulated by behind-closed-doors data analytics and shouted through the Twitter-sphere, is that doubts, impressions and perceptions, even when contradicted by hard evidence, are more influential than they have ever been. This is the age of 'alternative truths', after all.

SLIDE

20. So the academy must counter the pseudo-populist narrative with an even more compelling narrative. As my contribution to framing that new and more hopeful narrative I would like to offer a four-point plan:

- The first point in my plan is we need to shift away from our obsession with 'world-class' universities and shift the emphasis back to widening participation. I am a long-time critic of global league tables, and other rankings, on the grounds that their methodologies are hopelessly flawed. Why should we take seriously methodologies we would probably not accept in our students' work? Every time I receive an email from QS inviting me to 'rank' anything, I send it straight to the junk folder. But I have a more serious objection. This language is divisive, because talk of the 'best' universities inevitably implies the 'rest' are second-rate. But it is the 'rest' that will always enrol the majority of students, and certainly new groups of students from less privileged backgrounds. It is hardly surprising that they resent such derogatory language, which also undermines most institutions (to the detriment of the whole sector - including, if they had the sense to see it, the 'best' universities celebrated in this self-destructive language). This language also produces perverse policy outcomes. Being in the top 10/50/100 adds not a jot to the real research quality and capability of these universities, however hyped it may be by marketing departments, and it carries the real risk that strategies will be distorted by focusing excessively on the metrics that determine league-table positions.

- My second point is that higher education should resist the galloping commodification, and outright commercialisation, of teaching. By this I mean not just outright commercialisation because most universities still have enough integrity not to put their degrees up for sale (not so sure about some private providers). I also mean the growing tendency to define academic programmes as 'products' that will 'pay back' for graduates in terms of future earnings. Of course, academic programmes should be subject to proper business(like) planning so costs and income can be properly understood. Of course, there should be greater flexibility in how students can learn - not everyone (or even perhaps a majority nowadays) wants to study full-time as young adults in campus-based environments created for the social elites of the past. But both aims should be realised through joint action within democratic communities, of students and their teachers. We all know that learning is a shared experience, a complex exchange of ideas in which even the most senior professor

continues to learn a little even if undergraduate students learn a lot. I also believe, as part of the same process, we should challenge entrenched discipline-bound orthodoxies more. We need more courses in 'post-crash' economics (to try to explain what went wrong in 2008 and since) alongside the inevitable courses dominated by econometrics (which not only fail to offer any answers, but don't even ask the question).

- The third point in my plan is to develop new forms of research - how research topics are identified, how research is undertaken, who are defined as researchers, how findings are disseminated and quality and value assessed - alongside more traditional forms of research and scholarship. Some have described this in terms of so-called 'Mode 2' knowledge that is highly contextualised and socially distributed. But other labels have been used. Perhaps closed scientific communities, inevitably with their own silent hegemonies and powerful hierarchies (which - to go back for a moment to 'world-class' universities - can be perversely reinforced both by rankings but also formal research assessment systems), need to be vigorously challenged. We need to encourage the formation of more democratically formed research communities, in which producers, users and beneficiaries have more equal voices. This goes far beyond action research or practitioner research. University-based research should not be something that is done to people, even with the best intentions, but what people do to (and for) themselves, actively engaging the widest possible sections of our many communities.

- This final point in the plan is to reinforce the involvement, the embedding, of universities in their communities. Of course we all understand the role they play as large-scale employers and spenders, in the familiar guise as economic multipliers. I can still remember attending a Town-Gown dinner in the very grand Victorian Town Hall in Leeds where the vice-chancellors of the city's two universities talked about jobs and it was left to the Leader of the City Council to talk about ideas. I am also not just thinking about engagement in terms of their vital contributions universities make to urban, regional or national development, the way in which they act as channels through which global knowledge can interact with these local environments. I am not even just thinking about the way in which universities are key elements within the 'clever cities' in which they are embedded, as beacons of culture and engines of innovation. All three, of course, are crucial. But to consolidate, and win back, the trust of the whole people, including those at risk of being suborned by Trump, Brexit and other 'populist' deceptions, they need to become in the fullest possible sense activists for their communities. We need to be on the side of the people not the elites, of radical change not the establishment. And there is no better place to demonstrate that than in our communities.

21. That then is my four-point plain to resist Trump, Brexit and what they represent - fair, and wider, access; open and shared learning; new, and more democratic, research communities; and true engagement. Above all what may be required is an apparently simple thing, a change of tone. But that is actually a tough call. For too long the academy has been absorbing the - worst - habits of the market. Too many university leaders have concluded that, although it may not be welcome, there was no alternative to this course. We all recognise its agenda - raising (or introducing) tuition fees to replace dwindling state support; partly as a consequence of the introduction of high fees but also because of pressure to enhance the narrowly conceived 'employability' of graduates, redefining students as both customers but also as 'employable' products; closer alignment with politically mandated R & D objectives in research and, more generally, building closer links with the corporate world; and re-engineering universities as business organisations.

22. But there are always 'alternatives' - and, crucially, universities are meant to be all about generating 'alternatives', so it is an abandonment to believe there is only one single path of development for the future. Maybe it is this abandonment, this failure of courage and imagination, not the election of Donald Trump or Brexit, that really risks putting us on the 'wrong side' of history. Perhaps we should recall that up to 2008, and sadly still today in part,

there was no challenge to the, apparent irresistible, rise of multinational banks. Perhaps we should recall the recall the pressure that many global corporations are also now under - on issues such as tax avoidance, employment practices, ethical behaviour. Maybe their experience should be a wake-up call to the academy. We need to regain - or, if not regain, reinforce - a stronger sense of social purpose. At times the Bologna process of harmonising, and modernising, European higher education can seem a rather dry-as-dust process - but there is one phrase that is always reiterated, 'the social dimension'. Universities across the world need to locate themselves back, unambiguously and radically, in the public realm, in the common wealth. My four-point plan is mean to be a modest contribution to that goal.

23. Thank you for listening - and I look forward to your questions and comments (and, once again, apologies that I am on the 'wrong side' of the Atlantic, although I assert as strongly as I can that higher education is not, and need not be, on the 'wrong side' of history).