**Discourses we live by: truth, and nothing but the truth, and negative capability**

The notion that we, as individuals or whole groups and cultures, in our discourses, or meta-narratives, have the truth and nothing but the truth is a universal phenomenon. The truth and nothing but the truth of politics, religion, of intellectual enquiry or of diverse ideologies. It is also the province of the fundamentalism, which, I suggest, is really quite ordinary. The word was coined in California and its origins lie in Protestant movements in nineteenth century America. These movements consisted of people who wanted to assert the inerrancy of the Bible: the direct creation of the world and humanity *ex nihilo* by God and the authenticity of miracles and the Virgin birth - as opposed to Darwinian evolution. But of course fundamentalism and related discourses of absolute truth encompass varied phenomena. However, following Wittgenstein, the notion, heuristically, is helpful in a search for similarities across different forms. Broadly speaking, fundamentalism is a defensive retreat from engagement with others and otherness, rooted, perhaps, in feelings of disrespect, marginalization or omniscience. It works as a metanarrative, in which the other is deficient, or to blame; or there is no alternative as in market fundamentalism. In the case of racism and Islamism people may turn to those who think like themselves and hostility may develop towards the different other or ideas and experience that challenge their view of the world. Having an absolute truth finds energy from individual and collective defensiveness and fear of the unknown.

A basic contention of the paper is that we are all, at times, prone to such tendencies, which can be illuminated through auto/biographical and historical enquiry. In the history of workers’ education, for instance, in the United Kingdom, autodidacts could be dogmatic about the truth, rooted in religion or an overly abstract Marxism (there were sometimes tutors who could be market fundamentalists too). Students’ questioning could be paradoxical: challenging conventional wisdoms but sometimes inflexible in response to others. They might quote texts, like *Capital,* with quasi-religious fervour. Their Marxism however could involve an extremely mechanical version of the materialist conception of history, in which human activity was controlled by economic forces independent of human volition. Being colonised by such a discourse, in fact, often denotes the opposite of certainty – a fragile selfhood in need of externally derived authority, whether from Marxism or religion. But ‘liberal’ workers’ education offered space to engage with the other and otherness in dialogical ways, even if there was often a struggle to do so. A space that came to be characterised by equality, trust, growing respectfulness (including towards the bigot), and the nurturing of dialogue and openness. At best workers’ education generated what Axel Honneth terms self/other recognition, because those who felt understood and valued are better able to value others. Educators like Tawney and Raymond Williams, alongside their students, created space to question and transcend familiar discourses, and to engage with the symbolic world and otherness in eclectic ways. But it can be challenging to do so, which can evoke defensive dynamics. To move beyond these requires a negative capability, in the language of the poet Keats: the capacity to live, for a while, in uncertainty and doubt without grabbing at facts or rigid discourses of truth and nothing but that truth.