**Lesley Gornall, Sheffield Hallam University**

**The accidental and distressing ‘aha’ moment – reviewing personal discourses in a troubled world.**

The progress of the twenty first century has been characterised by uncertainties and crises, some obvious, some creating a sense of unease and not knowing, or understanding. Varoufakis (2013), referring to the financial crash of 2008 describes this as:

“aporia – that state of intense puzzlement in which we find ourselves when our certainties fall to pieces; when suddenly we get caught in an impasse, at a loss to explain what our eyes can see, our fingers can touch, our ears can hear. At those rare moments, as our reason valiantly struggles to fathom what the senses are reporting, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/22/the-shallow-state-trump/our aporia humbles us and readies the prepared mind for previously unbearable truths. An when the aporia casts its net far and wide to ensnare the whole of humanity, we know we are at a very special moment in history.” (Varoufakis, 2013 p1)

Whilst the economic issues may have been the greater focus of western news outlets, human tragedies were developing around the world on an unprecedented scale. 2014 had already been challenging, debates around events in the Middle East, Support for refugees, growing poverty, social justice, privatisation of public services demonstrated polarised views within bonded social groups based on very different sources of knowledge, information and personal experience. This had already impacted on my teaching. Training Youth and Community Development Workers, certain values, hitherto assumed were no longer always evident in class. This was particularly evident in module related to anti – discriminatory practice where searing judgements were made about groups in society. Thanks to a French friend living in the UK pointing out that the British do not teach the Enlightenment, I had restructured classes to create a safe framework for debate using some of Locke’s core concepts, relating them to more modern models to understand how beliefs and values are formed. Whilst this had a positive effect in class encouraging debate and mutual understanding, I was left contemplating the reality that some of the anxieties I had about British political discourse were, in fact, related to a very different and deeply embedded social framework than that of our European neighbours. Already reasonably interdisciplinary as an educationalist turned social pedagogue now teaching applied education, sociology, with a little developmental psychology I both returned to my roots in French and German Literature and started to explore political philosophy, causes of conflict and was finding more questions than answers across a range of disciplines, and the arguments made by those in power made even less sense.

This, then was the situation, when looking at a street map on the pavement in December 2014, “I got hit by a bus”, in different times could have represented a major personal disaster, yet in the ensuing months of late 2014 through 2015, enforced immobility and difficulties reading, created an unusually intense, at times frightening window on a world in crisis. This paper is an exploration of the impact of a distressing ‘aha’ moment when, having worked and lived in Paris, a deep sense of solidarity with the people of France, combined with an academic awareness of the numbers of people killed in Muslim countries in more quietly reported attacks by the same terrorists, gave rise to a period of intense personal reflection. Stark uncertainties came to the fore from the unprecedented combination of worldwide crises and events. A sense that worldwide discourse is increasingly limited by the immediacy of messages, became belief, and a concern that the more discourse, both political and social, is limited to ‘soundbites’, the more populist views and what Foucault would describe as ‘episodic’ or ‘sovereign’ acts of power, self – propagating acts of domination and coercion – by individuals, groups and states, would be perpetrated.

Events ranging from global humanitarian crises – refugees fleeing on an unprecedented scale, horrific wars with complex, often hidden root causes and interests, to more localised and individual reactions to the global economic crash and anxieties around supporting families are almost daily occurrences. Fear of terror is pervasive and real. Media trustworthiness has been destroyed, and across the world division and hatred are being both articulated and acted upon in the most regressive manner. Worldwide, political leaders are under pressure, and maintaining meaningful discourse is increasingly difficult. The paucity of the discourse in both the UK BREXIT Referendum, and the US Presidential Campaign is testament to a global ‘disempowerment’ in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault’s ‘general politics’ and ‘regimes of truth’ are no longer the result of scientific discourse and institutions, but are instead driven by the media and a democratic process increasingly responding to popular bias to maintain power – power has become an end in itself rather than a process constituted through knowledge and understanding. Knowledge and learning have themselves become commodities, in the US and UK in particular. The US and the UK are in constitutional crisis, European Leaders are struggling with their own populist movements, movements not based on agency and a ‘battle for truth’, but instead a much more visceral ‘fight or flee’ response emerging from the uncertainties and creeping poverty emerging from the economic crisis. A watershed moment, on an individual and global level.

For Foucault, this now missing sense of agency, and the role of education and science in informing and driving the ‘battle for truth’ is central to maintaining discourse and the positive, social power which creates a battle for the ‘status of truth and the economic and political role it plays’. The ‘aha’ question to be explored is the extent to which facilitators of learning can continue to deliver a process of critical thinking and unpack, question and work to overcome the global realities which impact on individual ‘lived experiences’.

At first, I was drawn to revisit Foucault with the aim of analysing the power relationships across the world, but soon became interested in the concepts of truth and subjectivity, and the three sets of relations: “our relations to truth, our relations to obligation, our relations to ourselves and to others” (Foucault 1983). In particular, the failure to respond to humanitarian crises, the growing and very obvious divide between communities in the Uk and US and their governments preparing for major votes of worldwide significance, and post crash economic arguments simply did not make sense and highlighted gaps in knowledge, yet fed concerns about the direction in which the world, and in particular the US and UK with that undefined ‘special relationship’ seemed to be heading. Those gaps in knowledge economics, in understanding people’s lived experience and response to authoritarianism and the increasing impact of the media and momentum behind ‘alt right, alt truth’ discourses.

There are parallels between Foucault’s (1983) critique of philosophers for preferring ‘a subject without history , Varoufakis (2013) states:

“Most politicians cannot be theorists. First, because they are rarely thinkers; second, because the frenetic lifestyle they impose on themselves leaves no time for big ideas. But most of all because to be a theorist you have to admit the possibility of being wrong –the provisionality of knowledge –and you know you cannot spin your way out of a theoretical problem” (p.13)

That politicians are not theorists is problematic. Not only are they unlikely to ever consider the depth of knowledge required to fully understand the complex web of power, finance, and conflict within which they are operating, but they are open to manipulation in exchange for power. The to and fro of individuals within the Conservative Party over membership of the EU is a prime example, with the pernicious bickering cumulating in the breakaway party, UKIP, and associated potential loss of power. Even after the vote, power politics are at play rather than any real concern for the impact on the British people. Now and during the campaign, the level of debate has been poor and uninformed, feeding misinformed anxieties, untruths and blame. Secondly, the daily lives of the electorate are neither understood nor valued, and any understanding of the narratives and life histories by which most people live and make their democratic choices is a source of manipulation, both in public speaking and the increasing role of online psychological profiling and targeted ‘soundbite’ campaigning by Cambridge Analytica who expanded their role from the Leave Campaign to the presidential campaigns of first Cruz and then Trump.

For Foucault, knowledge of self is a privileged position based on reflexive techniques , to know, explore and tell the truth about oneself. These reflexive techniques require degree of personal confidence and strength, which is not necessarily the result of education, particularly not in the most tested nations of the US and the UK. Foucault further explains that the lack of subjectivity apparent across western philosophies is apparent in Habermas’ three techniques of manipulating things to create production, manipulating knowledge to give significance; imposing wills on individuals to dominate, a prescient view given that in 2017 world leaders are protecting production; protecting an ailing economic system, and increasingly authoritarian stances are already in place in the Anglo – Celtic world (Varoufakis 2013).

In seeking to construct a ‘scientific knowledge of the subject’ Foucault (1983) aims to develop a history of science which is built on the ‘discursive, institutional and social practices from which those sciences arose’. Thirty four years later the failure to achieve a public discourse based on a philosophy of nature has created divides and brought latent prejudices to the surface leaving voting populations open to exploitation through distorted truths blaming others for, and making unachievable promises about fixing a failing system. Foucault’s few that subjective scientific knowledge has a political dimension in posing the question of what we are willing to accept, what we are willing to change, and to diagnose what we are is all too pertinent in 2017. ‘Normalisation’ of attitudes deemed unacceptable and certainly written into UK law as hate crime, have been given airtime in a perversion of free speech which ignores the caveat of not inciting hatred. This hatred has been turned into action with openly aggressive and oppressive laws in the US, and 72 breaches against the Human Rights Act reported in the UNCRC report on the UK in 2016. The driving forces behind the inhumane failure to deal with humanitarian crises, are power and economics.

In a sense, I am a moralist, insofar as I believe that one of the tasks, one of the meanings of human existence—the source of human freedom—is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile. No aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us.

We have to rise up against all forms of power—but not just power in the narrow sense of the word, referring to the power of a government or of one social group over another: these are only a few particular instances of power.

Power is anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good. (Foucault 1980)

It is in understanding economic history and current issues that we see a ‘definitive and inhumane law’. (Foucault 1980)

Even as a reasonably well informed academic in social policy and development, Economics has been a peripheral area, despite the daily runs up of figures in the news, the actual mechanisms of economic power have represented social circumstances requiring a response, and like probably the majority of people have left the to the experts, sharing a historic sense of trust. Despite growing unease, it was only the unusual amount of time afforded by an accident which provided the necessary space, in which, having reached a state of ‘aphoria’ or puzzlement, and a deep sense that the system was potentially beyond repair, required greater understanding.

So, to a study of economic history. I was reminded about the parcelling of land in the UK known as the enclosures land seizures by the wealthy, who then taxed and demanded rent from those who worked it. Typically, lessons without context, yet here were the beginnings of a banking system in the UK, replicated in the US, characterised by tacit compliance for centuries.

“here lies a delicious paradox: consent grew more powerful the more economic life was financialized. And as finance grew in importance, the more prone our societies became to economic crises. Hence the interesting observation that modern societies tend to produce both more consent and more violent crises” (p30)

Effectively here are the roots of commodification, not just of goods, but of trade and services, and, as a consequence, financial services became valid. What Varoufakis (2013) sees as an Anglo – Celtic system which has since become dominant, and represents a root source of many boom and bust economic situations: Boom and bust economics now clearly implicated in the inter – bank lending and selling of loans which was one of the causes of the 2008 economic crash. Boom and bust economics which characterised the industrial revolution, and attempts to stabilise currencies through mechanisms such as the Gold Standard. History repeats itself, the social changes inherent in the enclosures and related ecological instability of deforestation, reflected by the Anglo American inflationary and unsustainable obsession with home ownership, boom years based on building railways, homes and factories, the cornerstone of current economic policy which have always ended in crisis and conflict. The naming of Roosevelt´s post recession ´New Deal´ Programme intriguingly picked up by Blairs regeneration policies in the late nineties, a potential indicator of the roots of Blair´s economic thinking and acceptance of dominance of the markets.

The second element of important and only superficially taught history are the post war boom years. The Adornian view of these years looks increasingly prescient, but the detail is more challenging still, the reality taking us beyond boom and bust to a tale of surplus and deficit and a series of attempted fixes, deals and increasingly material wealth creation through trading effectively in nothing, with little cognisance of the long – term impact on people. Post war history is not generally taught in the UK. In teaching anti discriminatory practice, I introduce the injustices around the partition of India, the role of African and Caribbean servicemen in the war and subsequent invitations to migrate, we discuss the origins of Israel and sources of conflict in the Middle East, but not the history, the origin of US domination and creation of surpluses at the Bretton Woods Summit in 1944, and the initiation of the Global Plan. After World War 2, the only countries not in deficit and with workeable currencies were the US and Switzerland. The Americans found the British too Imperialistic to deal with and ultimately established a system with Germany and Japan creating markets for American goods and continuing to control currency with the dollar as the central benchmark, and a strong Deutsch Mark as back up currencies. Even in the earliest days, Keynes himself championed regulation, but was overruled on the basis that the system would regulate itself. This is the source of the post war boom, US exports, and imports from Japan and Germany based on a strong dollar and everyone joining in surpluses being recycled to support growth. Keynes identified an inherent flaw in the system, in that in times of recession, countries in deficit would not comply and would devalue its currency to promote trade. The US overstretched itself with war first in Korea and then in Vietnam, ultimately turning surplus into deficit, and a Global Plan into a ´global minotaur´ the reality hidden in the cellar, and instead of a plan with arguably related to worldwide prosperity, the goal became to maintain the American Dream´, based on material wealth, a model built on surpluses was now dealing with deficit economics worldwide.

Keynes was right, and, despite a system of loans to shore up deficit times, and surpluses incurring an interest charge, the exchange rate mechanism collapsed in 1971 leading to demands for gold reserves held in the US. Country. With the rise of overdrafts, and surplus penalties came currency speculation leading ultimately the speculation in virtual stocks hedge funds, fictitious profits and, ultimately leading to the crash of 2008. A system that was not only doomed to fail based on historical patterns, but was also feeding economically motivated interventions worldwide, and the inevitable searing inequalities of Globalisation.

Jefferson´s much quoted statement that tyranny breeds rebellion, seem to be much quoted but not often heeded. The injustices related to intervention in the Middle East have not been openly discussed, and injustices in the West leading to incidences of absolute poverty in developed countries have been largely ignored, global forces have long been driving rebellion and the sowing the roots of extremism. Similarly the increasing failure to meet the needs of young people in developed countries is leaving a void in an adolescent need to belong, to be taken seriously, gain respect from others and their peers, and to have something to believe in. This is a summary from a student report on a 16 year old young man joining the English Defence League in Dover, now serving a sentence for violent affray – ha had no understanding of the underlying conflict and issues. The overwhelming response of French people in January 2015 was to stand together against hatred, in 2017 the far right are expected to at least reach the second round of the election. In the UK, inciting hatred has become normalized in certain press outlets, and cited in the 2016 Report by the EU on racism and intolerance. The report also criticizes the government for failing to regulate, and for failing to act against politicians making hate –based speeches. Both the BREXIT result and the election of Trump in the US have been followed by a significant increase in violent hate crime. At the time of writing, Trump has openly praised Breitbart for its news reporting, the West has its own very powerful extreme views taking power, raising the question of why accepted codes of tolerance and equality are being dismissed by the electorate.

Some of these issues are quite clearly related to protest about poverty, anxiety that the `other´ is taking something which is not theirs, campaigns built on untruths and manipulated facts often easily demonstrated to be untrue, but failing to convince. Rothkopf (2017) suggests:

“The shallow state, on the other hand, is unsettling because not only are the signs of it ever more visible but because its influence is clearly growing. It is made scarier still because it not only actively eschews experience, knowledge, relationships, insight, craft, special skills, tradition, and shared values but because it celebrates its ignorance of and disdain for those things. Donald Trump, champion and avatar of the shallow state, has won power because his supporters are threatened by what they don’t understand, and what they don’t understand is almost everything. Indeed, from evolution to data about our economy to the science of vaccines to the threats we face in the world, they reject vast subjects rooted in fact in order to have reality conform to their worldviews. They don’t dig for truth; they *skim* the media for anything that makes them feel better about themselves. To many of them, knowledge is not a useful tool but a cunning barrier elites have created to keep power from the average man and woman. The same is true for experience, skills, and know-how. These things require time and work and study and often challenge our systems of belief. Truth is hard; shallowness is easy.” (https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/22/the-shallow-state-trump/)

This is the exact opposite not only of Foucault’s project, but of humanity’s innate need to learn and develop, and is the result of some very fundamental changes in society seen most in the anglo celtic countries. The US and the UK both languish at the foot of tables regarding literacy, numeracy and child and adolescent well being. Teaching for tests does not encourage analysis, and these are the most tested children on the planet, the impact of social media and quick fix easy entertainment has created a demand for quick fix easy news, and easy solutions. What Putnam described as a ‘diminution of social capital’ in 2000, has reached a conclusion with the diminution too of ‘cultural capital. This is, however, not new. As a northern community development professional BREXIT was sadly not a surprise, the parallels with the US ‘rustbelt’ meant that a Trump Presidency too was not a surprise, a prediction based on subjective instinct rather than any form of scientific knowledge. The analytical answer lies perhaps in an assessment of authoritarianism, not the leaders, but the people who follow them. Hetherington (2009) completed research that a significant growth in members of the Republican Party had been drawn to the party because they themselves demonstrated authoritarian personality traits, and that they were creating an extreme, divisive group within the party. Adorno’s F-scale had already identified authoritarian tendencies toward prejudice and ultimately fascism, often related to an authoritarian or repressive family background. Stenner (2005) identifies much more the social condition and issues facing an authoritarian personality, revealing certain resonances with my working life, the authoritarian´s discomfort with other perspectives those lacking ´right thinking´ reflects a subtle change in undergraduate writing which suggests less support of development and more ´correct decision making in working with teenagers. This hints at an equivalent change in social conditions and attitudes, and a ‘predisposition to intolerance’:

“The idea that there is a readily recognizable disposition that somehow brings together certain traits – obedience to authority, moral absolution and conformity, intolerance and punitiveness toward dissidents and deviants, animosity and aggression against racial and ethnic out groups – remains widespread” (p. 3)

Given that authoritarians are more likely to identify fears and feel them more deeply, the cultural shift to rapid and brief information has created a social climate which will swing to the right. Stenner’s research indicated further that there is a subset of people who have hidden authoritarian tendencies which are triggered when they are put under pressure. Given the loss of status and self belief which is a result of unemployment and poverty, the unprecendented levels of inequality, and rhetoric of hate which has been given increasing coverage, the conditions exist for authoritarian tendencies to come to the fore, and beliefs to become immune to debate. The need for social order, accepted hierarchies. More….

“More than that, authoritarianism reveals the connections between several seemingly disparate stories about American politics. And it suggest that a combination of demographic, economic, and political forces, by awakening this authoritarian class of voters that has coalesced around Trump, have created what is essentially a new political party within the GOP — a phenomenon that broke into public view with the 2016 election but will persist long after it has ended.” ([http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism 2017](http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism%202017))

The research undertaken during the primaries demonstrates a high correlation with authoritarian tendencies and support for Trump, and suggests that the change in American politics is much more than one man, it is a high proportion of the population, including authoritarian personality types, and those explained by Sterners ´theory of activation´ triggered by fears and the persistent discourse of imminent terrorist violence, and potentially related vicious circle of fear, authoritarianism and support for increasingly extreme governments and actions by them – itself distorted in the actual statistics of people killed in the west, far outnumbered by Muslims killed by terrorists in the Middle East. Challenging for those of us who teach applied social sciences is both how to teach students about world conflict, without suggesting that the world is a terrifying place, enough to trigger latent authoritarian traits, and how to facilitate informed debate beyond comfortable beliefs.

Rather than offering solutions, the enforced and continuing period of reflection has raised more questions in terms of supporting learning and encouraging debate in a range of contexts from community to Higher Education. What is clear, is that it is important to develop as broad an interdisciplinary understanding as possible linking Foucault´s concept of the subjective and scientific. Understanding history, all its facets and the consent which personality and circumstances allow governments and regimes, which have brought the world to its current watershed is and ongoing project. Understanding the potential personality changes resulting from such troubled times represents a major professional challenge. Both aspects have initiated studies in economics and psychology with the hope of promoting informed democratic debate intrinsically linked to the perceptions and biographies of people we work with.

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