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Public Intellectuals, Universities, and a Democratic Crisis

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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

It is an honour to be here at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

I feel at home as an Irishman in an institution, indeed in a city, with so many Irish connections. I feel at home in a country which is Ireland's nearest neighbour and increasingly our close friend. And I feel at home as an academic speaking to representatives of different cultures and to a younger generation who are challenged in so many ways by the current changes taking place in international economics, in politics, and indeed in the public world.

It is just nine months since Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's state visit to Ireland, the first visit by a British monarch to an independent Ireland. Her Majesty's visit, her perfectly judged words, her gesture of respect for those who died in an Irish cause, her use of the Irish language, her evident pleasure at being our honoured guest, symbolised the remarkable transformation in relations between our countries over recent years and it was deeply welcomed all over the island of Ireland.

Many factors contributed to making the royal visit possible and such a success. In that regard, I would like to pay particular tribute to my predecessor, President Mary McAleese, who throughout her term of office did so much to foster reconciliation and friendship across these islands.

When the L.S.E. was founded in 1895 by the four leading Fabians, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas, its founders were convinced of the power of education in not only lifting their fellow citizens out of poverty but also of such citizens understanding, participating, and in time, offering an alternative form of society, one that would be

egalitarian, democratic, tolerant, one which would extend and deepen democracy in every aspect of life. Such an achievement would also constitute, they felt, the establishment of socialism as an alternative to capitalism. It would also function as a mediating influence in radical change and thus serve as an alternative to the violence of the class conflict which was widely advocated in a number of countries at that time and which seemed a real prospect.

The century that was ending, was one of immense change. The response to such change, as intellectual historians such as H. Stuart Hughes have shown, gave us the great founding texts of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Croce and others. But it was not only philosophers and political theorists who responded to the new order that was emerging. Shaw and other writers recognised the changes that were underway, read the philosophical and political books and pamphlets, and responded with essays, lectures and literary works.

The writer as public intellectual, as analyst and campaigner for change, was a role that George Bernard Shaw and others assumed with vigour and dedication and Shaw's involvement with the L.S.E. was part of that public engagement, as was his sustained interest in the social change he saw as necessary in Ireland, and the place of literature in assisting the consciousness that would demand and deliver that change.

Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel in his recent excellent study *Shaw, Synge, Connolly and Socialist Provocation* shows how Shaw believed, like fellow Fabians, that the conversion of the middle classes was essential for the democratic choice they sought. He was not joined in that opinion by fellow playwright and Irishman John Millington Synge. John Millington Synge held an alternative radical view based on what he saw as the real suffering of the downtrodden and thus he rejected as idealism the Shaw project of middle class conversion. It was Synge's work that brought Padraig Pearse closer to James Connolly, O'Ceallaigh Ritschel shows.

As O'Ceallaigh Ritschel's work establishes, however, both writers were participants in the project of change. He shows, very valuably, how Shaw through the agency of Frederick Ryan, an Irish journalist, who had attended Shaw's Fabian lectures in London, went on to lecture in Dublin to the Irish Socialist Republican Party, founded by James Connolly, on democracy and drama, drawing on the works of Ibsen and Shaw, William O'Brien attended and was influenced and indeed as was Connolly himself. This connection between London and Dublin, this flow of ideas for social reform, or for the radical resolution of Ireland's relationship with Britain, knew no borders. The Irish literary presence in London, be it Shaw or Wilde mixed the projects of achieving literary success and a wider audience with the necessary irony of unresolved relationships, of Irishness.

This would have a lasting effect, not only on the artistic form, but on the consciousness of audiences.

In so many ways the tragedy of modern Ireland's recent difficulties is that it did what the founders of the LSE hoped. It was the first English-speaking country to decolonise, to walk in darkness down what would become a better lit road – a road illuminated by teachers and students at the LSE. The problem for Ireland was the failure to achieve economic lift-off at the same moment as soon after. By the time the more recent economic boom began, leaders and people had all but lost connection with the cultural and political elements of national revival which might, if retained, have provided an ethical brake, made a critique that would have constituted the regulation that was needed.

The L.S.E. at its foundation, even though it was aimed at the moderation social democracy offered as an alternative to class conflict had an emancipatory purpose, and its early discussions, through Shaw, had a direct effect on Irish realities and on Anglo-Irish relations.

It is perhaps insignificantly recognised in Ireland and Britain the practical orientation of the themes chosen by George Bernard Shaw in his lectures. He lectured on the working conditions of the labouring classes and their consequences but also on Ibsen and the morally informed social vision in his plays.

Peter Graham's Shaw Shadows: Re-reading the texts of Bernard Shaw is quoted in O'Ceallaigh Ritschel's book. Shaw is explicit as to his view on the importance of there being a mediating option to the violence he saw as inevitably flowing from the institutionalisation of inequality and the denial of rights, even voting rights, for women.

"If Socialism be not made respectable and formidable by the support of our class – if it be left entirely to the poor then the proprietors will attempt to suppress it by such measures as they have already taken in Austria and Ireland. Dynamite will follow. Terror will follow dynamite. Cruelty will follow terror If, on the other hand the middle class will educate themselves to understand this question, they will be able to fortify whatever is just in Socialism and to crush whatever is dangerous in it."

The decades of the twentieth century at the L.S.E. will be for many others around the world, the periods when they encountered such teachers as Harold Laski. As a young student

I recall Dr. Labhrás O Nualláin, born in Manchester, but Irish-speaking, who gave pioneering lectures at University College Galway speaking of the L.S.E. and Laski's influence on those who had come to study, students who aspired to lead their countries in what were to be, or had been promised, as decades of decolonization and national independence. Through Laski and his writings such as *The Grammar of Politics* the L.S.E. acquired a global reputation not only for theory and research but for analysis of the role of the State and State-making.

I associate such great achievements, as the British Welfare State, the National Health Service, pioneering work on equality and the need for solidarity, the responsibilities of interdependency and support for the League of Nations as a valuable legacy of the emancipatory scholarship of the L.S.E.

I remain still in awe too of the moral content of the scholarship and the life of such intellectual giants of social policy as Professor Richard Titmuss. Professor Titmuss founded the subject of Social Policy. The first occupant of the Chair of Social Administration at L.S.E. in 1942 his work was drawn upon by all of us who would later lecture in social policy, poverty studies or equality. His was an engaged view of research and scholarship and he did not avoid the challenge or the controversy, of engaging with competing models of Government policy be it on public health or pensions, poverty or social justice.

As a young university teacher appointed at the end of the Sixties, I had myself, hopes of the emancipatory power of a humanistic social science. I could not have foreseen the influence of the second coming of the ideas of theorists such as Friedrich Von Hayek or the influence they would have, not only on theory, but on policy, policies that would be privileged in the UK and the US in the eighties and the nineties of the last century as not policies chosen among options but as a single hegemonic version of the connection between markets, economic policy, and life itself.

I would this evening like to offer a brief reflection on public intellectuals, universities and the role of both in what I perceive to be an emerging democratic crisis, one that sets representative parliamentary accountability in conflict with unaccountable economic forces. It is a time when the credibility of parliamentary power has been called into question, when alternatives to the State in civil society are being advanced and when, at institutional level in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond the legitimization crisis of which Jurgen Habermas wrote so many decades ago has begun to emerge. Having squandered credibility through light regulation and thus powerless regulatory authorities the State itself has been made vulnerable.

There are, at any time, hegemonic myths that inform, even determine the discourse of the times. The myth of rational markets with infinite growth was the hegemonic myths of recent decades. Apart from some distinguished exceptions such as the Galbraiths, father and son, it was a largely uncontested myth in the modern period.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of State Socialism itself a distortion of the utopian impulse, indeed a dystopia, an extraordinary hubris emerged by way of response which led to the articulation of what was little less than a utopian vision of the Right. Politics would now take second place to unregulated markets. It had a philosophical source in the renewed interest in the writings of such as Friedrich Von Hayek and Karl Popper.

We have, as a consequence, been living through a period of extreme individualism, a period where the concept of society itself has been questioned. The public space in so many countries of the EU has been commodified, and it is as calculating rational choice maximizers, rather than as citizens, we have been invited to view our neighbours. That is the mark of our times, the hegemonic version, by which it is suggested, we live our lives together. Our existence is assumed to be, is defined as, competing individual actors at times neurotic in our insatiable anxieties for consumption as Zygmunt Bauman puts it in his book *Consuming Life*. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it – "Consumers become the promoters of the commodities they consume". They become a commodified entity in their presentation of themselves.

Behind these transitions lies an intellectual rationalisation. Standing in support of unregulated markets, of unaccountable capital flows, of virtual financial products, are scholars who frequently claim the legitimization provided by a university. The university is at times put under pressure to demonstrate its utility as the seat of the single hegemonic model of society and economy that prevails.

I believe universities are challenged now not only to recover the moral purpose of original thought, emancipatory scholarship, but also in their ethos, to recover the caring and concerned teaching such as that offered by Harold Laski at L.S.E. to students from abroad such as Krishna Menon. That university teaching was more than instruction. It was encouragement to obdure, to overcome the strangeness of exile, and the loneliness of solitary study, that came with the move from one culture to another.

The ethos of the L.S.E. was also defined in its early days by significant public intellectuals such as, Bertrand Russell who taught German Social Democracy at the school in the years 1895 to 1896. After the publication of his tragically neglected book *Power* in 1934 he taught classes on

The Science of Power in 1936. The 1934 book had outlined in detail how collective behaviour could be manipulated. "If a crowd has gathered, particularly if music is playing you can get them to believe in anything", Russell had written.

This is a powerful legacy of teaching and research. It had its beneficiaries far beyond the lecture halls of the L.S.E. The Irish in Britain who were building and shaping the Post-War Britain in many ways were also benefiting from the security of the welfare state and the National Health Service, which had the intellectual support of, among others, scholars at the L.S.E. as they delivered their labour, their ideas.

Now, in the second decade of a new century it is not for the L.S.E. alone that the challenge to recover or reinforce a university ethos of emancipatory scholarship exists. All of the universities in both our countries, indeed universities all over Europe, and beyond, are challenged.

Much ground has been lost in terms of the public space, the public world, the shared essential space of an independent people free to participate and change their circumstances, to imagine their future, be it in Ireland, Europe or at global level.

Intellectuals are challenged, I believe now to a moral choice, to drift into, be part of, a consensus that accepts a failed paradigm of life and economy or to offer, or seek to recover, the possibility of alternative futures. And were universities not special places, the citizens of the future may ask, for the generation of alternatives in science, culture and philosophy?

The questions that are posed to universities now are questions that go far beyond ones of a narrow utility.

Are the universities to be allowed and will they seek the space, the capacity, the community of scholarship, the quiet moments of reflection necessary to challenge, for example, such paradigms of the connection between economy and society, ethics and morality, democratic discourse and authoritarian imposition as have failed, or alternatively drawing on their rich university tradition, at its best moments of disputation and discourse, will they seek to offer alternatives that offer a stable present and a democratic, liberating and sustainable future.

We are experiencing now I believe an intellectual crisis that is far more serious than the economic one which fills the papers, dominates the programmes in our media. Such a crisis has arisen before at times of great or impending change and it has drawn a response from intellectuals as

they were forced to react to the collapse of the prevailing assumptions and they engaged with the need for a new paradigm of life and politics.

When Max Weber the great 19th Century social theorist responded to the events of his time in the second half of the nineteenth century it was not the end of empire in itself by any means but it was a time of change in the forms of empire, creating transitions, the response to which would be dominated by the technocratic thinking of the time. Weber proposed a commitment to rationality as the key building block of the future.

He was anxious to save as much as possible of the rationalist heritage of a previous century but at the same time introduce something new but beyond logic, intuition, and religious sentiment. He thus critiqued the excesses of both positivism and idealism. Yet even then Weber saw the dangers of the potential abuse of that which would be claimed to be rational.

He spoke of the threat of a spring that would not beckon with its promise of new life, but would deliver instead the threat of a winter of icy cold. He prophesied an iron cage of bureaucracy within which conformity would be demanded to that which no longer recognised its original moral or reasonable purpose, a time that would come when what was irrational would wear the mask of rationality.

He was writing at a time when technocratic rationality had succeeded reason as the central concept in political writing. A century earlier reason had been central in Adam Smith's "The Theory of Moral Sentiments". Weber, of course, could not have envisaged the consequences of the journey intellectual thought would make from reason to rationality, but then on to calculable rationality, and finally, in our own time, to the speculative gambling that is at the heart of so much global misery with its view of those humans who share our fragile planet, not as citizens, but as rational choice maximizing consumers.

We are in such a winter as Weber foretold. For example, we have arrived at quite widespread acceptance by policy makers of a proposition rejected by the majority of serious economic historians, that markets are rational. This, on occasion, leads, in the extreme, to the suggestion, absurd and all as it may sound, that it is people who are irrational, the markets rational. That public, for whom, Friedrich Von Hayek wrote that economics are too complex, it is suggested, require something other than the direction of elected governments.

They must be forced into a compliance with technocratic demands, for which there is frequently scant scholarly support and, needless to say, no mandate. This represents a challenge to

democracy itself I suggest and to the scholarship that supports it. The mediating institutions are losing authority and the prospect of raw conflict increases all over the world as language, words without emancipatory force give ground to what is unaccountable but global.

Neither is the intellectual crisis of our times simply a problem for the L.S.E. or Irish universities. When one of Europe's foremost public intellectuals Jurgen Habermas writes of the fragility of the European Union I feel he is referring to the contest in Europe that is now there for the public world. Social Europe was born as a concept in response to the legacy of war and social misery. It was connected to a democratic discourse.

As social Europe as a project is undermined by the commodification of ever more aspects of social life, as European social capital, the strongest in the world, is monetized, it is clear we have arrived at such a crisis now as great or greater than that faced by the previous generation of political and social theorists at the end of the 19th Century. It is a challenge for all of us to craft our response to our crisis as they did to theirs in their time.

I believe that a university response that is critically open to originality in theory and research, committed to humanistic values in teaching, has a great opportunity to make a European, even global, contribution of substance; that such a university can be the hub of original, critical thought and a promoter of its application through new models of connection between science, technology, administration and society; I believe Irish and British universities have a great opportunity to break such new ground. The L.S.E. has the advantage of a fine heritage known worldwide.

Independent thought, from home and abroad, and scholarly engagement with our current circumstances are crucial. A paradigm drawn from the fiction of rational markets, I humbly suggest, needs not only to be let go. It needs to be replaced by a scholarship that is genuinely emancipatory, centred on originality rather than imitation, one that, for example, restores the unity between the sciences and culture in their common human curiosity, discovery and celebration of the life of the mind, enables new visions to emerge.

Following Ernst Bloch I believe of course that utopian alternatives must be accompanied by a praxis that is envisaged and I suggest that it must be one that is applicable within, and in the context of, institutions. I do not claim a space for abstract grand theory at the cost of middle range theories or policies that have immediate or short term application.

The concept of utopia is being recovered in such intellectual work such as that of

Ruth Levitas and others and the insistence of Ernst Bloch that utopianism not only involves a rejection of what is, and a hope for an alternative, but also a strategy for its implementation is central to the new writing as that of the scholars in the Centre for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick.

In recent times we have paid a heavy price for unfettered speculative accumulation, for light regulation for the global consequences of what followed acceptance of amendments to the Glass-Steagall Act in the US, an act that had its origins in responding to the crash of 1929 that sought to ensure it would never happen again. The amendments released a flood of virtual financial products across the world. To that, many countries including our own, added their own speculative bubble.

The architects of these developments frequently invoked, and found, intellectuals willing to support them – intellectuals who frequently drew on the prestige of a university for authority.

When I look back now at those subjects which I taught at NUIG and abroad – political science and sociology – subjects which in so many ways emerged from the late 19th Century of Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Freud, Croce and others, I am struck by the urgency in the approach of such theorists, in their day, to the social change of their times, and the effect their writings had.

As H. Stuart Hughes 40 years ago wrote, it was a time of rejection of positivism, an attempt to incorporate consciousness in social theory, but above all theorists responded to the urgency of the changes that were unfolding – with their own intellectual work. The work of John Maynard Keynes represented the response of a public intellectual in his day many decades later.

In response to two World Wars that followed the reconstruction of nineteenth century Europe and the demand for new relations with a world it had previously dominated within the model of empire, Keynesian strategies emerged to address unemployment and poverty, demanded that the importance of health and education be recognised. There was an intellectual debate, one that offered and contested different democratic options.

The mid-twentieth century constituted an atmosphere where social capital emerged and social democracy mediated conflict. The twentieth century saw too a public debate about the role of the State, the rights of the individual and social policy, of the balance between these areas.

In succeeding decades political philosophy and social theory gave way to issues of administration analysis of the role of the State faded and gave way to applied studies, in an administrative sense, of the State's actions.

A discourse based on solidarity interdependency, shared vulnerability, community, gave way to a discourse on lifestyle and individual consumption. A society of citizens gave way to a disaggregated mass of individual consumers.

I find Weber's nightmare of a rationality that in time would counter the original purposes of institutions, that would morph into an irrational form, incapable of adjustment to change internally or externally, difficult to reject as an account of the modern period. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor put it – we have been drifting to unfreedom and I suggest that in terms of society, social cohesion, there is nothing as irrational as unregulated markets.

Internationally too the context for universities has been changing. As parliaments were weakened at home, an ever more volatile global financial world was emerging, one that was unaccountable, at best amoral in its demands and consequences.

The new technology meant that speculative capital could move in real time.

At international level, while for a brief moment many decades earlier, in a previous century, such as at the birth of the United Nations, it seemed that international monetary and economic matters might be governed in an accountable way. Such a moment quickly disappeared never to return. Yet the need for such regulation remains, is urgent, and requires re-articulation.

For those of us then who have had the privilege of being university teachers, those who remain, the university is, and remains I suggest, a space from which new futures have always emerged and must do so again. The ethos of independent scholarship is what delivers a previous scholarship's achievements into the present, and challenges that scholarship for renewal and replacement.

I admire the singular dedication of researchers, the sacrifice they make but I also value the importance of the teams that are necessary for co-operative achievements in the sciences and the time fundamental research takes. At the same time, I believe that the division of culture and the sciences is an unnecessary price that has been paid for the hegemony of a particular moment in the history of European scholarship, a moment of hubris that divided culture and science.

It is time to recover the unities of scholarship, to strike out for originality. That, I suggest, might be our most valuable European contribution, one that will be valued by future generations.

As subjects are re-cast, unities can be restored, and we should consider Edward Said's suggestion that it is in the interstices between subjects that the most exciting intellectual work happens.

There is not, for example, any better future for economics as a subject and discipline than as political economy within a system of culture. Would it not be an exciting initiative, I suggest with humility, for the LSE and an Irish university to establish an endowed Chair to explore the ways in which an ethico-cultural idea of Europe and of the national could be invoked to check the drift to unfreedom.

I suggest that the universities and those who labour within them are crucial in the struggle for the recovery of the public world, for the emergence of truly emancipatory paradigms of policy and research. It is not merely a case of connecting the currency, the economy and the people, it is about recovering the right to pose important questions such as Immanuel Kant did in his time – what might we know, what should we do, what may we hope.

It is a time to recover consideration of the public world we share, the fragile planet, for which we must have responsibility, and lodge within it a concept of intergenerational justice and the State, civil society, communities and citizens are needed to act in concert. In his *The Politics of Civil Society* Frederick Powell concluded his plea for social policy, the subject given its name at the L.S.E. by Richard Titmuss as follows:

"Social policy may yet be the saviour of civilization because it is the instrument for realising social justice and creating a virtuous society. Without it, civilization is undoubtedly 'bust'. We can conclude that the normative role of civil society is to further democratise social policy by seeking to transform the welfare state into a more participative institution, based on the principles of co-production between the state and the citizen and the personalisation of welfare – not to replace it, as a conservative advocate. Their denial of a public realm constitutes a denial of democracy.

Privatisation is the road back to autocracy, in which a hollowed-out state is bereft of anything meaningful to attract the support of the citizen – especially the marginalised, excluded from the mainstream of society. Continued allegiance to democracy involves an open acknowledgement of the fraught relationship between state power and political activism. Citizen participation through the promotion of a vibrant civil society is the best hope of democracy in the 21st century."

These issues and challenges we in Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe share. Happily there has never been a better environment for us sharing our scholarship, our students and our concerns as we move together to a new version of our interdependent lives. We need to consider the revitalisation of the relationships between the institutional structure of our States and our citizens, to forge a connection between the citizens of Europe and our shared European Institutions.

We need to draw on the debate on alternatives within civil society as opportunities to extend or deepen democracy rather than as alternatives.

There is a moral basis to those who are protesting to those who would like a communitarian new beginning, but I believe that to walk away from the State would be a tragic error on the part of those who seek an emancipatory transformation in our societies. Obviously, of course, to rely entirely on advocacy directed at the State, and to neglect the possibilities and promise of alternatives within civil society would be a disastrous choice too. In combining the tasks of concientization with a commitment to original thought and compassionate and emancipatory scholarship and teaching, public intellectuals can help bridge the space to that utopia and its praxis that we all, as vulnerable inhabitants of our fragile planet, need.

George Bernard Shaw would have encouraged us to save and reconstruct social democracy and to bring its refreshed promise to all the citizens of our shared Europe, to a Europe committed to an ever-deepening democracy.

I wish the L.S.E. the great future it deserves, built on its great founding principles to which we are all indebted and to which George Bernard Shaw contributed as an Irishman moving between our two islands, committed to justice and change, and recognising, in the life and the work, no borders to intellect or moral purpose.

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