



## CHAPTER 6

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# Conclusion

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In drawing out the historical, linguistic, political and socio-economic discourses that shape the valuation of the humanities, this book has sought to articulate the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary moment within universities in England. In tracing the shift from liberal to neoliberal education, from the nineteenth century to the present day, this book has presented a previously underdeveloped narrative of the processes of governance and the many ways in which values are expressed. The book has re-focused the present context of neoliberal higher education through a richer historical lens and re-framed approaches to economic valuation within a longer and more diverse picture. It is important that we represent a plurality of values as a challenge to the seeming irreversibility of neoliberal policy.

## 6.2 PART I: REFLECTIONS ON QUESTIONS OF VALUE

Given the open-ended nature of scholarship in the humanities, this study has covered a wide range of topics: policy interventions, public debates, literary representations, and intersections with the cultural sector. However, in each case, the analysis has relied upon the disciplinary aptitudes of the humanities: close reading, articulation, and an awareness of historical contexts, in order to generate an alternative account of value

that is severely lacking from present policy. By way of summary, I return to the five questions that I established in Chap. 1, which have each been addressed in the following ways:

*What Are the Differences Between Liberal and Neoliberal Education?* The introductory chapter highlighted how the relationship between liberalism and neoliberalism is composed of a series of inheritances, correspondences, and echoes. The chapter highlighted that the dualism of liberalism (educative and economic) is integral to the nineteenth-century understanding of the relationship between the individual, policy, and the state.

*How Can Critically Reading Policy Help Scholars Understand a Culture of Economism?* Chapter 2 established a historical narrative of Payment by Results as a means to critique present policymaking culture. Explaining how educational policy was economised between 1858 and 1888 through reform, provided a previously absent history of how economism operates within the very processes of governance. Critical interpretation of the *Browne Report* revealed its interest in fulfilling a national skills deficit as opposed to the cultivating well-rounded citizens. This chapter also observed how the prioritisation of individualism in higher education raises the potential for liberal values to be reinstated in the direct relationship between the university and individual students.

*How Does Debate Between the Humanities and the Sciences Create Meaning?* Chapter 3 provided an insight into the discourse between the sciences and the humanities through examples of cross-disciplinary debate. Returning to the two cultures debate revealed the ways in which rhetorical intervention can alter public perception and how opposition can be a productive site for articulation. Analysis of Arnold and Huxley's exchange served as a reminder of the many values that scientists and humanities scholars share. The chapter concluded by recognising the significance of both *how* the humanities are represented and *who* it is that articulates values within and outside of higher education.

*How Can Fiction Act as a Reflective Tool for Articulating Value?* Chapter 4 demonstrated the ways in which fictional representations can articulate the value of the humanities. The chapter provided examples of how academic fiction explores the discursive potential of the novel and provokes imaginative responses with which to address contemporary changes. Three

literary investigations offered a series of reflections that challenge the myopic narrative of economic value and open up imaginative spaces in which to consider the strengths and limitations of a liberal education.

*How Are the Academic Humanities Connected to Other Cultural Institutions?* Chapter 5 addressed the impact agenda of the 2014 REF by drawing upon a wider context of accountability in public museums. It placed the changes in universities within a wider context of neoliberal governance dating back to cultural policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, the discussion of the public museum demonstrated how, since the nineteenth century, cultural values are configured within a framework of national interests and regulated through mechanisms of accountability and assessment of public impact. The chapter drew from critical scholarship in the field of museology in order to provide a language with which humanities scholars can address the contemporary changes facing research assessment culture in higher education.

### 6.3 PART II: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

There are, inevitably, many dimensions of the value of the humanities that this book omits. I believe that an exploration of student perceptions around life choices and university study from a humanities-oriented perspective would form a valuable contribution to this ongoing conversation. As the concluding sections of Chap. 2 have suggested, there is opportunity for embracing new ways of thinking about student valuation of higher education, many of which are far more nuanced than the present confines of the National Student Survey (NSS) metrics. In addition, the emergent relationships between the humanities, technical, and scientific subjects could be understood anew in the twenty-first century. Hybridity, as discussed in Chap. 3, is increasingly present within higher education institutions in England. Areas such as arts wellbeing, the medical humanities, creative industries studies, and interdisciplinary digital centres are in need of further critical consideration. Chapter 4 demonstrated how academic fictions can be a fruitful source of representation and reflection. The work of representation is inevitably always ongoing; future research might consider the interrelation between fiction and film adaptations as further sites of mediated representation.

Finally, this book has limited its reflections on the contemporary to the period 2008–18 and specifically to England, as a larger frame risks

producing critique without the required depth of engagement with context and history.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that marketization is a UK-specific phenomenon, but rather that the challenges and required humanities responses in the US, across Europe, in India, or in Australia require specific institutional knowledge and attentiveness to particular cultural histories. Higher education continues to be reformed and the recent policies, such as the Augar Review (May 2019), the Teaching Excellence Framework subject-level pilots (2018–), and the approaching 2021 REF, evidence that predicting the future of universities is difficult. That said, I feel justified to argue that the policies discussed within this book (in particular the *Brown Report* and the “impact” agenda), will remain of great significance in terms of the paradigm-shift they instituted. Indeed, Paul Temple argues that “higher education in England has changed between 2010 and 2015 to a greater extent than in any other comparable time period” (2015, 174). The longer perspective provided by this book demonstrates that these recent changes are not without historical precedent. However, this context has also reinforced how significant the recent changes within higher education policy are in a history of the economisation of the value of higher education. This context is ongoing. In an interview published in the *Sunday Times*, 18 February 2018, Damian Hinds (the newly appointed Secretary of State for Education) outlined his belief that some courses “have higher returns to the student than others. It’s right that we now ask questions about how that system operates” (Shipman 2018). Hinds’ focus on graduate salaries as a valuation of a degree course is in keeping with the neoliberal monoculture that this book critiques. In his first television appearance on the *Andrew Marr Show*, 18 February 2018, Hinds suggested that reducing the length of some degrees to two years would mean that students could spend “less time out of the labour market” and that making arts and humanities courses cheaper would represent fairer “value for money” (Hinds 2018). Although many changes are afoot, the language and the terms of debate for most contemporary policy debates in higher education remain as monotonal as those highlighted throughout this book. It is my hope that the methodologies contained within might yet prove useful in facing these emergent assessments and limited descriptions of educational value.

<sup>1</sup>There are times in which speaking about England is also speaking about the UK and vice versa. For example Research Councils UK and the Research Excellence Framework, which are both UK wide.

## 6.4 PART III: VOICES OF THE HUMANITIES, AND A CALL TO ARMS

Through a variety of fora this book has demonstrated that humanities scholars are well situated to imagine and articulate an alternative approach to value. In 1895, in an address to the Harvard Young Men's Christian Association the American philosopher William James asserted the following: "believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact." (62) In his talk entitled "Is Life Worth Living?" James observes that "possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal" (62). Consider a situation in which, instead of defensively reacting to the present undermining of their values, humanities scholars articulated their analyses of the wider historical, cultural, and philosophical narratives in order to shape and take ownership of the valuation debate. Economic metrics might suggest that a humanities degree offers poorer "value for money" but this says nothing about the value of a humanities degree to those electing to study it, or the wider world that is changed by those graduates. This book has argued that observing the difference between articulation and justification is essential in this regard. The humanities should actively seek to resist forms of neoliberalism that define value only in economic terms. We should read policy documents and respond to short-termism with historical narratives. We can call out the poverty of the language with which white papers describe the purposes and benefits of education. We must be cogent and critical of the ways in which instruments of assessments articulate value. However, with these essential preconditions in mind, I do believe that the humanities should be held to some account. Helen Small captures this aspiration when she argues that academics do not object to "the idea that they should be socially beneficial" only to the "peculiarly reductive variant of political economy that dictates the terms of assessment" that "fundamentally mistakes the nature and purpose of writing in the humanities, the arts, and the pure sciences" (2013, 63). In the present moment, in which neoliberal governance seeps into all sectors of public life, it is the role and responsibility of the humanities to re-imagine and demonstrate alternative narratives beyond the market. This is not a metaphoric or abstract exercise but a real societal need, as the final section of this conclusion further illustrates.

## 6.5 PART IV: THE NEED FOR THE HUMANITIES IN AN AGE OF POPULISM

The year 2016 marked a turning point in the rise of right-wing populism in England and the US. The result of the EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump have empowered a political ideology that argues that expertise is elitist. Coupled with the perception that neoliberal governance mechanisms are neutral, populist preferences for “common sense” have created an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism. Prime Minister Theresa May’s empty mantra “Brexit means Brexit” and Michael Gove’s assertion that “people in this country have had enough of experts” are exemplary of unthinking language. In his infamous Brexit interview with Faisal Islam for *Sky News*, 3 June 2016, Gove stated that “I am not asking for people to trust me. I am asking the public to trust themselves, I am asking the public to take back control of our destiny from those organisations which are distant, unaccountable, elitist and don’t have [the public’s] own best interests at heart”. The vague metaphors of Gove’s speech, pitching the “destiny” of the people against the conspiratorial “elites” are representative of the paper-thin ideology of populism.<sup>2</sup> To effectively critique such expressions requires an ability to articulate the flaws of weak metaphor and highlight unsubstantiated claims. This is work for the humanities: as George Orwell argues in “Politics and the English Language” (1946), “this invasion of one’s mind by ready-made phrases [...] can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one’s brain” (137). Populist narratives in politics and the popular press rely on a discourse of value that is simply inane, as well as exclusively economic. The value of the humanities needs to be articulated with integrity and social intelligence through a discourse that challenges the anaesthetised landscape of popular debate.

However, this engagement cannot be merely defensive, as Pierre-André Taguieff argues, “populism seems to become stronger the more intellectuals criticize it” (1995, 43). Therefore, an effective means through which to articulate the value of intellectual activity is a challenge that the humanities continues to face. In *Not For Profit*, Martha Nussbaum states that:

a catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance, since

<sup>2</sup> See Mudde, C. (2004, 544) for discussion of the thin ideology of populism.

the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorant stereotypes purveyed by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth, or bogus claims from valid ones. World history and economic understanding, then, must be humanistic and critical if they are to be at all useful in forming intelligent global citizens. (2010, 94)

Facts without understanding and evidence that claims to exist outside of narrative produce a dangerous situation. An ability to interrogate normative statements is urgently necessary. Nussbaum identifies the critical skills that are developed in the humanities, which are required in order to interrogate and understand policy. The skill-sets of the humanities entail social accountability, which can attend to present debates of language and value. Rather than reacting to specific policy, or seeking to evidence ourselves economically, scholars should be questioning the foundations that support the neoliberal agenda that seeks to undermine them. How the humanities articulate their value matters precisely *because* of the present tensions and the mismatches between the activities of policy and research. To observe concerns of longer-term significance relies on the ability to step back from the conflict of the present, in order to negotiate the position one holds within a broader perspective. The history of universities is one that continues to be written and the disciplines within the humanities should be at the forefront of the efforts to remember, to revise, and to reform narratives of value.

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