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## ON THE ETHICS OF TRUTHFULNESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR THOMAS OSBORNE

Professor Thomas Osborne (SPAIS, University of Bristol, author of *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and The Ethics of Truth* (1998)<sup>1</sup> and *The Structure of Modern Cultural Theory* (2008)<sup>2</sup> visited Prague in mid-2018 and presented a paper *On Montesquieu, Markets and the Liberalism of Fear*. The interview was conducted online by Dr. Filip Vostal (CSTSS, Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences) in autumn 2020.

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*Filip Vostal: In your fascinating book Aspects of Enlightenment from 1998 you say that thinking about society should be driven by the “ethics of enlightenment” (alongside the explanatory, exploratory, normative dimensions of social inquiry), but your conception differs from the Enlightenment as a socio-historical motion and set of cultural principles and imperatives. Can you say more about your idea of the ethics of enlightenment and why it should account for a central principle in the social sciences?*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Osborne, *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and The Ethics of Truth* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Osborne, *The Structure of Modern Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

Thomas Osborne: My first book was written in the mid-1990s amidst the controversy over post-modernism, relativism and the culture wars. It seems like a different era now but I do think the concerns of that book are still relevant. My aim was to defuse the rather silly opposition between so-called Enlightenment intellectuals pursuing truth, reason, progress and all that, and the supposedly irrationalist, irresponsible postmodernists. I wasn't really keen on either camp (I don't believe in Reason with a capital R but I'm passionate about truthfulness and the truth) so my concern was not to come down on one side or the other in a high-handed or moralistic way but to try to rethink what we might mean by the Enlightenment itself. Actually the Enlightenment still has a bad reputation in some "progressive" quarters these days. But if one actually looks at that period of the 18th century you see that it wasn't at all what many people think it to be, this cold, rationalising, rather smug Eurocentric movement. The Enlightenment included some magnificent and brilliant intellectual comedians and satirists such as the wonderful Diderot and, in a different way, Montesquieu. These people were virulently anti-slavery and actually very hostile to the smug idea that "West is best" and that everything comes down to "Western Reason" (whatever on earth that is). They weren't always sure what they wanted but they certainly knew what they were *against*; and generally I think that is a good principle – we know more about what we dislike – slavery, tyranny, despotism, thought-control, intolerance, war – than what we necessarily want, and on which we are likely in any case to disagree.

I figured if we could have a different image of what we mean by the Enlightenment we could defend its legacy in a different, more reflexive, way – much as Michel Foucault had sought to do in fact, and of course my book was much-influenced by him, albeit a kind of Foucault very much mediated by analytical philosophy. By the ethics of enlightenment I simply meant this concern for the truth, what the philosopher Bernard Williams a bit later came to label "truthfulness" and also the related demand that we counter all the arbitrary types and vicious effects of power, whatever they are. By invoking ethics I meant this, again influenced by Williams, to be opposed to a "morality."

With a "morality" you have rules, standards that you claim are permanent, smug self-righteousness and piety – and I am against all of those things. An ethics is just about being reflexive about what we're doing, even trying to see the complicities of power that we harbour within ourselves – no-one's perfect. And indeed though I am concerned in all my work, I think, with this issue of truth and truthfulness, I am of course human – perhaps regrettably – and certainly can't claim always to have been a uniquely truth-

ful or good person myself. Perhaps, and although I think of myself as an atheist and very secular, there is a very basic Christian residue here (and my favourite writer at the moment happens to be Blaise Pascal); well, *we are all sinners* – before you remove the splinters in the eyes of others, remove the dirty great planks in your own... I certainly suspect we are all of us, even the best, deceived and self-deceived in some, probably many, ways. Power lurks inside us as well as beyond... And all of us – not just those “in” power as such. So, you see why I still think all this stuff is massively relevant today, personally, politically and intellectually.

*Filip Vostal: If you look at contemporary science and expertise, the excessive academic machinery producing tons of knowledge, ways of knowing, the sheer volume of papers and books published daily, the incredibly narrowly-profiled work force that universities “produce” in many disciplines, etc. – is it still possible to retain some sort of (solid) idea as truth (as something, at least, temporary until a new “paradigm” hits the scene that might help us to orient in the world and in ourselves)? Or is the university, given its contemporary well-mapped business character, destined to become yet another branch serving the capitalist economy?*

Thomas Osborne: Yes, perhaps it could be said that we live in a knowledge society but not in a truth society – and they are different things. The knowledge model has what is basically a utilitarian attitude to the truth. If it's useful – to the State, to the economy, to the institution – then that's knowledge. I am thinking in particular of the way that our funding bodies stress that all research ultimately has to be economically useful. And useful means practical – so there is a lot of pragmatism in there too. So much of science is not about curiosity but about utility and pragmatism, and even those scientists who are just genuinely curious have to blanket their work in a superficial aura of utility to get funding. Even wonderful disciplines such as cosmology and pure mathematics (I am in awe of these disciplines) find themselves captured by the merchants of utility. Okay, well that's life, and it would be naive to think that science has ever been entirely disinterested. In fact sometimes that's a really good thing, as in the science of the climate emergency – it's jolly good that those scientists have a utilitarian sensibility. They are driven by curiosity but they do also want to save the planet. As for the social sciences and the humanities, however, sometimes I am simply lost for words. The huge expansion of the university sector here in the UK means that just about everyone gets to – or rather has to – publish, but the ethos of

productivity-at-all-costs with its ridiculous metrics (an entirely inappropriate way to get at the genuine pursuit of truth) means that an awful lot of what gets published is just trendy virtue-signalling, jargon and waffle – what Harry Frankfurt quaintly described with the technical term “bullshit.” Here, again, we could say there’s not *enough* attention to bog-standard pragmatism and utility, except in the incredibly bland way that funding bodies have it – “useful for the UK economy” and so on. And where there is such attention it is usually to show us things we think we already know anyway. To my mind, very little actual, interesting, provocative “research” goes on in the social sciences, for instance; I mean research on a genuine science model, where the researchers don’t have any idea what they’re going to discover in the course of the research itself. Scientists ask questions but they ask them because they don’t know the answer. But social scientists tend to ask questions to which they think they already know the answer. An awful lot of so-called research here is just about confirming what people think they already know. This gives these areas of knowledge a quality of redundancy in the systems sense, I mean endless repetition and rehashing of themes and findings where new “information” as such isn’t forthcoming; instead of information – “differences that can make a difference,” in Bateson’s terminology – we just get iteration and reiteration. Of course, redundancy itself can be useful and making the same point again and again can be useful, especially if the point is a good one! But all the same, it does get a bit predictable to say the least. Yes this is due in part to the commercialisation of education – capitalism if you like, but only in a rather displaced way, at a sort of once-removed level. Aside from the supposedly all-important drone research and such like that’s done in universities such as mine, however, there is still a lot of genuine academic freedom – of topics, viewpoints and causes – in the University. Those who wield power in the university itself don’t really care what we do, so long as we bring in the students on the benches to do it and preferably if we get funding from outside so we can build nice labs for the chemists and biologists. But we do need to be aware that this academic freedom, however limited it is, is both much more valuable *and* much more vulnerable than we might think. It is something we need to defend quite vigorously. Without it the University would become the enemy of truthfulness, where we are all told exactly what we have to research, what we have to teach and so on. Then never mind the drone research – we will be the drones ourselves.

As for me, this brought about a sort of crisis quite a while ago, from the beginnings of the neoliberal turn. A long time ago! I felt that the system was forcing me to compromise my values (in so far as I knew what they were!)

and to make choices that I wouldn't have made but for short-termist managerial and other pressures. I just felt a fraud basically. For a long time I put quite a lot of effort into writing rather awful poetry and comic novels that I thought were funny but which no-one would publish. They're still in the bottom drawer... Then, beset by feelings of uselessness and failure, as I think happens to most people at times, I actually went into university management for a bit and realised that it is even more corrupting of the soul than I had imagined! I very quickly started over-hearing myself using stock phrases such as "going forward" and "level playing field" – it was frightening! That was at least an interesting discovery though and I still really value the experience. We shouldn't despise power, even if we should always be wary of it. Management is a responsibility and it is good if the actual academics are doing it and not just career-administrators. We have to be responsible enough to take on the mantle of power when the call demands it as well as just to criticise it superciliously from outside – otherwise we are just hypocrites.

Now, however, at least in terms of universities I think there are important things we need to do. Basically we need to fight anything that opposes our freely conditioned commitment to the truth; fight those who want to impose their worldview upon us, whether it's the rather anti-intellectual and impoverished neoliberal – and managerialist – worldview that has beset universities or the drift towards the moralisation – and toxification – of higher education itself. They used to say of Ernest Gellner (great Czech thinker as he was!) that whatever side the revolution came from he was sure to be the first against the wall. I would hold it be an honour if anyone might some day say that of me. You see, Tocqueville basically had it right. One of the biggest problems today, not just in the university but just about everywhere, is actually with conformity. I have a residual love for the work of Theodor Adorno... much more so than for trendier types like Walter Benjamin. Adorno was intolerant in some respects (mostly of people who didn't like Schoenberg) but we can learn a hell of a lot from him. He was obsessed with the way in which people used strategies of distinction in ways that were actually more to do with conformity to the status quo – pseudo-individualism and all that. Today in intellectual life and beyond, the conformists are not just the neoliberals but also all the gurus of subjectivity and re-enchantment that pop up everywhere and tell us to be creative and innovative all the time (how Adorno would have loathed them) and also maybe some parts of the supposedly progressive but actually at times rather narrow and moralising "thought police" who often seem to want to shut down freedom of thought and "reeducate" those they don't agree with. Education is a processual thing;

it should be liberating, not absolute or prescriptive. I am almost as scared of the piety of the moralists as I am of the cynicism of the managerialists. Sometimes they are combined, and that's even worse and even more frightening. So, yes, we have to fight for freedom, not just academic freedom but for truth; and I know – and don't care! – that that makes me sound like an old-fashioned liberal, like dear old J. S. Mill with his experiments in living. But there's a radical side to this liberalism. Part of this is precisely that we need to follow Amartya Sen, someone I admire a lot, and expand what we mean by freedom in the first place and make it much more fundamental to social and political life in general. And it's not just "our" freedom that matters; freedoms are globally interlinked. Our freedoms in the West have been bought in part at the cost of freedoms to countless peoples around the globe and we have to recognise that just as they are recognising it. We need history to do that of course, and if in some fantasy world I were Education Minister or Vice-Chancellor to be honest I would move a lot of what goes by the name of the social sciences in universities and boost up the department of History since after all, these disciplines are all ultimately historical. Social "science" is really something of an oxymoron. History is how we fight the distortions of memory, the indulgences conferred on us by personal experience. And however important personal experience is, it does not offer a necessary royal road to the truth. But alongside the historians I would put not just those who work in the humanities and probably people like me, the sociologists – who are mostly historians anyway, or should be – but those who are concerned with the future. I think futurology is incredibly important but what goes by the name of futurology has mostly been just utterly crass grandstanding pseudo-prediction. Popper was right about that – we can't "predict" the future. But we can anticipate different kinds of futures. The problem is if we don't want to fall into appalling naiveties and errors, we can't think – anticipate – the future separately from history, which is why I think futurologists and historians should be in the same departments. They should be having conversations with each other. There you are, that's my academic utopia for you.

*Filip Vostal: Where else shall we then look when searching for the truth? Art? But isn't art also compromised by one-dimensional commercial imperatives?*

Thomas Osborne: Well, I don't think we need to search for the truth "anywhere else" at all. It begins here. As Foucault used to say, we have to work on ourselves. We have to encourage those who seek out the truth and who

speak truth to power – incredibly difficult as that can be (and I myself am a born coward and so I know!) – wherever that is. And we have to cultivate – in our students and colleagues and friends and others, even our enemies – the virtue of critical truthfulness *per se*. We need to talk to each other but most importantly we need to listen to each other. And yes we need to multiply forms of truth. Art might be one area to do that and genuine art is certainly a key site of modern truthfulness. But yes, so much of what passes for modern art is just clever video technology and the like, and – worse – pseudo-intellectualism. I despise intellectualism in art because it's always fake. That's not the way to attain truthfulness! Few things make me more depressed than going to a gallery and reading the plaque under some pretentious "installation" that has a quote from Derrida or Žižek or Davidson on it. Here I am definitely in sympathy with the late Stanley Cavell who wrote some great things about modernism and its historical sensibility. Art does exist – not everything is just commodity culture and the culture industries – but it exists mostly where, even with modernist types of art that sought to "make it new," there is a sense of an autonomous tradition, a conversation over generations of artists responding to each other in the same and related media. Truth, in that sense, is internal to the ongoing conversation that makes up the tradition. But artists today often think they are being clever if they trash their traditions and make a break with everything that's gone before (which has, of course, usually been done before anyway). That is just ignorant. Look at the history of Western painting in the modernist era; it was a conversation on its own terms, a kind of "discipline" in the strong sense that autonomised itself outside of any ulterior knowledge (science and so on). And when we go to an exhibition of modernist painting today, for instance, we are not just looking at particular paintings but listening to that conversation – but most artists today seem to have no sense of that. Their conversation is just all horizontal and not vertical or historical – with their peers (for and against), their audience (with) and their sponsors (for). So, no, I haven't seen what I would call a genuine work of modern art for ages or at least not in established galleries and places like that, but I do think genuine art can pop up in odd places – perhaps in fashion, even television at times, perhaps even in certain kinds of intellectual work, perhaps in mathematics! Those are the sorts of places to look for truthfulness in art. It can be anywhere, but you have to look. So instead of Tolstoy's question "what is art?" or Goodman's question "when is art?", I would pose the question "where is art?" But because art can be anywhere, even in apparently non-artistic places, I am generally a bit suspicious of people who actually label themselves artists.

It's something you have to earn. When artistic truth ceases to be a difficult, open question and just comes to be about either dogma or identity politics then there is certainly no chance of anything genuine getting out.

*Filip Vostal: Many say that now, in the age of post-factuality, with a plethora of conspiratory associations repeating superstitions from the Middle Ages (as if modern reason never occurred), hyper-fast technological change that profoundly re-shapes social, political and scientific communication, that the pursuit of truth, one of the leitmotifs of modernity, is not anymore possible. But rather than cynically accepting such reasoning, isn't critique-as-practice the imminent task when crafting a liveable world (or segments of it) and "good life"; rather than spiralling down into shady loopholes of a constant search for the "true/full picture of the world," of factuality and counterfactuality, of the "right" morality?*

Thomas Osborne: I do think that truth is still important. I mean, truth is important generally because untruths and lies – the opposite of truth – are very typically used by those who abuse their power: climate deniers sponsored by oil companies, right-wing populists, racists, fundamentalists and fanatics of all kinds and so on – but it's also important right now for particular reasons. Yes, one is to do with the expansion of the institutions of knowledge itself, and another is to do with the internet and the effects that it's had. Obviously now we have all this post-truth stuff; people sit in their silos and spout nonsense on the internet about Hillary Clinton running international paedophile rings in order to make us all get vaccinated with Dr Evil's mind-drug and so on and that really is quite awful. The historian Niall Ferguson compares our current era of communications to the Reformation where, with the advent of printing, the costs of information were reduced so much and various memes took off exponentially. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, hammer of witches, went viral around Europe with dire consequences. "Blasphemy" was rooted out everywhere. It is actually something quite terrifying, like out of the *Life of Brian*. "Stone him! Stone him!" Note though that such people as the internet faddists of various kinds, far from eschewing the language of "reason" actually seek to embody it – with so called facts and evidence and so on. The way to get at them is not just with better facts, or with facts that are actually facts, but with a critical attitude to the truth – in short, with truthfulness.

In fact, far from being just post-truth I think our era has also seen a great mushrooming of the truth. We are as much infra-truth as post-truth. I agree entirely with the late Michel Serres, French philosopher of science,

that Wikipedia is one of the great innovations of our time! It really is a great thing. People have access to much more truth than ever and a lot of it is really quite high quality, but of course they also have access, if they are so inclined, to much more confirmation of their fads and fixations, whatever they happen to be. Again, it is not that there is either too little or too much truth but that we need to concentrate on giving people insight into ethics of truthfulness so that they have sensible and realistic sorting procedures for assessing the truth and to know when they are just being conned by “fake” truth. This is an educational matter really and we need to be courageous about teaching our children the habits of constructive scepticism. To my mind that means that faith schools and the like cannot be part of a genuinely open, decent society. Teach your children your religion at home – at school and in public life they need to learn more critical habits. So yes this is something that we should be teaching in schools – not just how to use the internet and that sort of thing (“IT studies”), but how to relate to truth, knowledge and opinion, how to relate to the plethora of truth claims out there.

As for post-fact culture or post-truth itself I am not sure if I believe it exists. The proper word for post-truth is downright lying in politics and the public sphere. Downright lying – there was a lot of that about in the UK during Brexit – should be punished and we need robust regulatory and other institutions to do that. Misleading the public should be as much of a crime as misleading a jury in a courtroom. I think where we can talk maybe about post-truth, though, is in terms of what could be called, after some very basic analytical philosophy of language, “performative” truth. When Donald Trump said “we’ll build a wall folks” did he know that this was basically baloney? Was he lying? Well, perhaps he believed it himself, no doubt he did; but in any case what was at stake was less a “constative” statement (“there will be a wall”) than a performative one (“I am someone who builds walls”) – he was performing his populism, telling his audience that “we all know” we need a wall, so we’ll get one. In this sense it doesn’t matter whether the wall is actually built or not so long as the performative intention is signaled: “I am the sort of get-things-done-guy who builds walls!” That is not exactly post-truth, it’s a different way of doing the truth, truth about what one is – or what one would claim to be – rather than truth about the world. This is not to defend people like Trump in any way, but most of what he did was not about post-truth but just about *not* telling the truth and also this performative attitude to truthfulness. Not least of what’s wrong with that attitude of course is that it’s impossible to assess, it’s just really a narcissistic assertion – but that of course was Trump all over.

As for how to get at the issues that concern us, I take a leaf from the writings of the Harvard theorist, Judith Shklar. She held that the key thing was not so much what we pose in a positive sense (though all that is of course important) but first of all just to find agreement on what we oppose. I actually think there is huge agreement or potential agreement on all this. We disagree on what we want but agree a lot on what we want to avoid... That our economic system is destroying the planet and has to be restructured, that we need to avoid as much as possible the dreadful pains of civil war (Pascal agreed with Hobbes on this – civil war is the *summum malum*, and we are seeing that in Syria), that global inequalities in such a globalised world are fundamentally unsustainable as well as being basically unjust, and so on. But no, this is not about coming up with some great, overarching “truthful picture of the world” – and usually of course those grand theories are the products of the monomania of the male-gendered side of our species! – but then, being human, what is good about us is that we have innovation and creativity to seed our own particular solutions and positive programmes for things, and the more diversity in that the better.

*Filip Vostal: I guess that many of the readers of this interview would consider themselves as intellectuals, men and women of “letters.” What ought to be the role of intellectuals today? Haven’t they/we utterly failed if we look at the contemporary state of affairs around the globe? Aren’t we useful (sometimes not even that) “idiots”? Or am I too pessimistic here?*

Thomas Osborne: Intellectuals – or a few of them, not many – can sometimes be surprisingly important. As Keynes pointed out – most of us are beholden to some ideology or other, did we but know it – which is why precisely looking at history and not least at the history of *ideas* is always important, to see what we are beholden to. We have a responsibility, all of us who use our minds, which of course is all of us whether we think of ourselves as intellectuals or not, to the truth and this can often involve a hard look at ourselves, at our own histories, at self-criticism... I don’t think of myself as an intellectual actually, but as someone who uses a few ideas I’ve cobbled together, borrowed and adapted from here and there and who tries to teach students how to use ideas sceptically and constructively. Perhaps that’s what an intellectual is. I prefer just to think of myself as a teacher, probably not always a very good one. My students often tend to be upset, at least at first, that I don’t give them “the answers,” but I am not trying to teach them the answers but trying to get them to think for themselves. That is the obligation to truthfulness that

is so important, not just for intellectuals but for anyone who has any kind of responsibility for the truth – as a teacher, a worker, a supervisor, a parent and so on. As for “grand” intellectuals I don’t tend to have much time for them. I never dash for the latest book by Steven Pinker or Slavoj Žižek, although I do sometimes read them eventually after the fuss has died down a bit (and I am a bit of a secret fan of the hilarious Žižek on Youtube – but then I am a fan of Monty Python as well). There is quite a lot of rather unattractive narcissism in intellectual life. And the fact is that intellectuals can be their own worst enemies. Too many of them are obsessed with scoring points off each other and not engaging with real problems, whether in the world or in the realm of ideas. Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus* is the great comedy classic of this phenomenon and should be read by every academic and intellectual. There is so much daft identity politics in intellectual life. I mean, intellectuals will literally identify with their great heroes. It is something I particularly dislike. It is all rather silly. I have read enough Seneca to know that one learns, if anything, more from one’s enemies than those who are on our own side. Though I consider myself to be on the left not the right, I still think that right wing thinkers like Norman Stone and Roger Scruton can be very interesting and challenging. It’s all part of the conversation. But one can take an idea from here, from there – my own work owes quite a bit both to Foucault and to Jon Elster for instance, who are incredibly different – without having to sign up to anything in terms of a wholesale *identity*, and I am certainly *not* either a “Foucauldian” (what an awful word) or, still less, a “rational choice theorist” (heaven forbid). Anyway, we shouldn’t be sectarian about the truth; it’s all over the place. But we do have to learn how to look for it, and that’s largely what I mean by “truthfulness.”

I am not sure if there are determinate strategies in the sense of “methods” for this. Yes even “idiocy” can be a good strategy! I once wrote a bit about this: the idiot as someone who deliberately stands out from conformism, but as a kind of exercise in the truth not as part of some self-congratulatory strategy of being a “contrarian” (self-styled contrarians are just about always just conformists by another name). Idiocy is not a psychological or intellectual disposition or a state of mind; it is about a deliberate exercise against something that feels too imperative, too much the norm. For me, writing “Against ‘creativity’”<sup>3</sup> was about that. How can one be “against” creativity? Creativity has to be good! Well, I tried to be a bit of an idiot about it – not

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Osborne, “Against ‘Creativity’: A Philistine Rant,” *Economy & Society* 32, no. 4 (2003): 507–25.

stupid, that would be different – and to think about it from the outside. But actually I think there are quite a few different stances we can take towards different problems, just as we can take different attitudes – playing devil’s advocate for instance – in a truly open conversation.

As for the world, the things we need to do are, as I say, actually quite uncomplicated and, if you ask me, fairly clear. Well the priorities are simple to list, the solutions less so, but we all know that too. We need to fix the climate emergency. We need to lend our voices to the courageous scientists who have called this out. We need to reform capitalism. That is not easy. Far too many so-called progressives just moan about this thing called capitalism or neoliberalism and say we should get rid of it, etc. (without saying how or with what we might replace it) and then take their salaries as per usual. But if capitalism suddenly collapsed tomorrow, though that might be good for the planet (depending on what replaced it), it wouldn’t be good for humanity in an immediate sense since we are all bound up with the development of capitalism whether we like it or not. Just about all of us on the planet are the children of capitalism, whether we like it or not. Protected “tribes” in the Amazon might seem to be outside the system but they are only protected, in so far as they are protected, *by* that system. The well-known quip that one can envisage the end of the world much more easily than the death of capitalism is unfortunately quite right. But we need to think about (and imagine) the end, however tentatively we do it, and really no-one is thinking seriously about that except the anarchists and idealists who don’t seem to me to have very much that is sensible – as opposed to being worthy – to contribute. Now, at the moment my colleague Professor Keri Facer and I are developing what we call a critical theory of conversation. Keri has been thinking about this notion of conversation for a while and I think it’s useful to connect it to this theme to do with truth and truthfulness. Well, a conversation is where you have a focused but open-ended exchange of views and perspectives, trying as much to reframe the initial problem as to find specific solutions. We see this as a very basic critical model. A conversation is a very wide-ranging thing. And actually we are not having a conversation as we should be having about capitalism. Neoliberals say that capitalism confers freedom (or their kind of freedom) and that we have to have it (and impose it, presumably, on everyone else). Leftists of various kinds and others, including a lot of intellectuals, describe themselves as “anti-capitalists” and leave it at that without doing anything else. But we need to talk about capitalism, not just embrace or denounce it. We need to have a conversation (in the strong sense) about it. I was always terrified when I was young and my parents came into my

room and said “we need to have a conversation ...” Well, that’s how it should be with capitalism.

*Filip Vostal: Can (Western) reason still be a source of ethical solutions to today’s problems? What do you think about non-Western rationalities as possible sources of new avenues of thought? Non-white, non-Western, non-European, “subaltern” – despite the wave of postcolonial scholarship and critique of Euro/Western-centrism that has taken the academy by storm in past two, three decades – are still rendered, it seems, geographically and otherwise invisible. Aren’t, for instance, Edward Said’s claims more valid nowadays than when he published Orientalism?*

Thomas Osborne: I heartily dislike this idea of there being some specific kind of “Western rationalism.” It’s essentialist nonsense and actually, in some guises anyway, does far too many favours to the West. Modern science, like modernity itself, was born accidentally; in the case of science out of two things: a degree of secularisation of intellectual culture sufficiently advanced to allow for something approaching free, practical, instrumental inquiry (and Shakespeare!) and the productive interests of nascent and then developed capitalism (which not just set the ultimate agenda, but created the surplus to support relatively “free standing” scientists and intellectuals, separate from church control). All that was basically an accident of history – as Max Weber saw long ago. Nor was it a particularly “enlightened” thing; it went along with a whole lot of theft, borrowing, exploitation and ultimately bloodshed. Not that those characteristics are unique to the West – far from it. One only needs to read history, which far too few people do, to see that. In fact I am always struck by how ignorant my students are of history. They often seem to think that the wicked British Empire was the only one in history. That cannot be good. We have to be realistic about the tendencies of humanity as a whole, not just the West.

Nor is capitalism itself “Western.” It just happened, for entirely contingent – if deeply complex – reasons to take off in the West. And after all, today the most effective capitalisms aren’t in the West anyway – they’re in China and the Far East. And there is nothing specifically “rational” about the West, whether that’s understood in a triumphalist or a hostile way. But by the same token I am suspicious of the idea that there are essentially “non-Western” rationalisms, subaltern rationalisms and so on. I just think this is to play rather childish identity politics with reason. Human beings are all basically the same in terms of their cognitive powers; what differentiates them is op-

portunities, in short (in the philosophical sense), *luck*. Such luck does of course have a history and it is not always a very edifying one, and of course luck has been exploited, denied, made inaccessible to vast, vast numbers of people – in historical terms, predominantly women of course. For centuries vast parts of the globe have effectively been silenced by the consequences of luck mediated by power. All that needs to be addressed and of course, if possible, redressed, though it is a huge, huge task – but not in the name of some kind of alternative non-Western or anti-Western essentialism, even if that's essentialisms plural. What do exist are particular, regional ideologies – whether these are attitudes to the economy (“Western” neoliberalism for instance), attitudes to human rights or religious and ethical attitudes. These differences are real and do exist but we need to be sociological – and historical – rather than culturalist about this. I dislike the notion of “culture” and I no longer ever describe myself as a “cultural theorist”; it suggests separate silos of experience, and that is just wrong. Cultures are internally differentiated, they overlap, there is constant borrowing and so on. Read Marcel Mauss, the greatest anthropologist who ever lived (even though he never left his room), for his analyses of how our human nature far more unites humanity (including the bad things!) than separates it. In Mauss's work societies are constantly overlapping and borrowing from each other. No society is pure or pristine. So with regard to those ideologies, we need to look not at the culture, as a kind of communitarian, holistic thing, but at particular societies and their power structures, for societies are always internally divided. We need always to ask, who were these ideologies developed for, and in whose interests are they? Neoliberalism is not just a “Western ideology;” but one developed by a particular capitalist class or at least some of its intellectuals, first in the West, then exported elsewhere. The same goes for non-Western ideologies: different regimes of human rights often serve those in power in particular societies, just as religions tend to be used to shore up inequalities of power in all societies. These are not matters of “culture,” they are matters of power and ideology, Western and non-Western.

You mention Said. Though I admire his literary criticism and his politics, I actually think that *Orientalism* is a deeply overrated text. Robert Irwin's work on this is a good antidote, or in a different way Amartya Sen's very judicious *Identity and Violence*. Though I dislike Said on this topic for what I basically think is his essentialism (for all his supposed debts to Foucault, the great anti-essentialist), I do think that he started an important conversation – after all, conversations can usefully begin with a provocation – and I am heartily behind the whole movement to broaden out the curriculum

in a non-Western direction, what goes here by the mantra of “decolonising the curriculum.” In that sense, I think what you describe as non-Western ideas can only be good, can only help with getting to better ethics of truth. The more voices the better, and though I am not a romanticist enough to suppose – perhaps regrettably – that being oppressed, silenced or deprived of resources gives you the automatic moral access to truth that some people seem to think, a wider range of perspectives, the inclusion of more conversations in the wider conversation, can certainly help; and of course, definitely, a healthy scepticism about the ideas of those who are privileged and have lots of power is also a deeply good idea to say the least. And in that sort of context, yes, Said’s work was at least a step towards a better ethos of truthfulness even if it didn’t itself, to my mind, state anything like “the” truth. There has been a complete invisibility of any kind of conversation on all this “West and the rest” issue for years and years (except in what were often rather unbalanced discussions of the so-called “European miracle” and so on); in fact the only people *in* the conversation were mostly privileged types from the West itself. Unsurprising as that was – where there are resources there are opportunities – that was not just bad for justice, equal representation and so on but *for truth itself*. Sociologists were probably amongst the worst actually. For instance, for years, social theorists and others in the West have been deeply complacent about what they called modernity; they invoked concepts like “rationalisation” or “time-space distantiation” and the like – and of course “modernity” itself, a very dubious category – which has been very cursory and slapdash with the actual history. One thing that broadening out the curriculum should do is make us all turn to history – or rather diverse and divergent histories – more seriously. Social theorists like Giddens wrote a lot about modernity but just about never mentioned the real history of slavery, imperialism, colonialism and so on. So, yes, all this is important. But it should take the form of a conversation and be about the pursuit of truthfulness – that can only be a good thing – not an imposition of some kind of pre-established “truth” that is imposed by fiat. Getting to the truth takes work; the truth cannot just be announced by a committee of the righteous. So what we should rightly do in broadening the curriculum should involve conversations, work; it should be a process rather than just being announced as the new compulsory conformity.

So, as I’ve insisted, we do have to preserve, however difficult, that precarious value of academic (and intellectual) freedom. And, yes, we have to introduce the proper norms and rigours of history, not just via the discipline of history itself but throughout the social sciences and humanities. To me,

the writing of history – alongside science and art – is the most enlightened form of truth-telling there is. Now, though I was trained originally as a historian, I have no aspirations to be a competent historian myself with a specialist “period” and all that (I would get bored too easily) but I do think, along with Collingwood and Williams and plenty of others, that the historical mode of orientation generally is incredibly important. History is a critical form of truthfulness. History is not memory (an overused term); history is criticism, it is one of the most important servants of the truth that we have. We all need it, West and non-West, whatever, and the awful truism that history is only written by the victors needs to become a critical object of history itself. Indeed it needs to become a *historical* fact and cease to be a present-day or seemingly permanent reality. That, again, will take work. But the victors, the erstwhile victors if you want to put it that way, also need to be involved. Concentrating on the West is not inherently a bad thing. Looking at the genealogy of Western ideas in the manner of someone like Foucault, Koselleck or Quentin Skinner for instance is not lazy or Eurocentric; it is to look at the constitution of intellectual authority in the West, at its contingencies and conditions. That has to be a good thing. Similarly, experts like economists get a lot of stick. Surely, people say, they are all just purveyors of the inequities of a reductive politics of the market. But economists are – and for that reason – incredibly important, *because* they have that authority. In the UK the Stern Report on climate change was, for instance, a landmark moment, precisely because the economists were finally getting into the conversation. And we should welcome that. Just as it will take (amongst other things) hard science to get us out of the effects of the climate emergency, so it will (amongst other things) help if economists start looking not just at how to make capitalism more market-efficient but at the effects of that efficiency, effects on the planet, “externalities” and so on. In short the point about any decent conversation is that we always need more voices in it – not just dissenting voices, not just subaltern voices, but *also* precisely the dominant voices themselves, those voices confronted with the other voices. And conversations can be difficult; they can change people – what forwards any conversation is the exchange itself, the reframing of the very presuppositions of the debate, the framing and reframing of problems as well as solutions. And then, with conversations there is the way in which you go away afterwards and think, maybe several hours later as you’re sitting on the bus on the way home... *ah!*

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