

UWC Adriatic
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Challenges for Changing Times

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be at UWC Adriatic again. I was last here four years ago for the start of term, which was most interesting to observe. I thank Mike Price for inviting me back again. Today, he has asked me to stimulate a discussion with you about some of the challenges of our fast-changing world: challenges that will affect you as you move through your UWC experience to university, work and adult life.

I have titled these remarks *Challenges for Changing Times*. I shall talk for about 20 minutes and then ask for your views. In my previous talks at UWCs the discussions have been the most interesting parts of the session.

Italy, your own countries and the wider world face many challenges. Each of you could produce your own list. Please tell us about those that you regard as particularly important in the discussion. Here I shall focus on just four challenges, which I have chosen because each is a product of our changing times.

But, first, let's beware of 'chronocentrism'. Chronocentrism is the belief that the present moment is central to the history of humankind. I remember being warned against chronocentrism when I was at secondary school back in the 1950s. My history teacher told us not to think that the post-World War II period, in which we were then living, was of special importance just because we were living in it. I pass on the same warning!

With that caveat, here are my four challenges. The first two are directly relevant to your future lives as individuals. The second two are more general, but will also colour the world in which you will live. I hope you will be inspired to do something about them.

Expressing each in one word each the four challenges are:

- Work
- Inequality
- Truth
- Trust.

Work

I start with work.

I expect that when you have finished your studies you all hope to find work that is either interesting or well-paid, or preferably both.

The world of work is constantly changing. It has been doing so particularly rapidly since the industrial revolution of the 19th century as successive waves of technology have changed the ways that we make things or provide services.

Motor cars put a lot of horses out of business. Robots are removing plenty of workers from the factory floor.

The current concern is the impact of artificial intelligence on jobs. Economists used to argue that when technology eliminated one type of job, new types of jobs emerged to fill the gap. This has been largely true, although, when we come to 'inequality', we shall see that well-paid factory workers who take lower-paid jobs as cleaners when they are made redundant are resentful of the change.

Remember that work is not simply about earning money. It is through their work that most people gain the satisfaction of contributing to society and feeling useful. The proposals floating around in some countries for a universal basic income, paid by the state, do not address this basic need.

Until recently technology mostly eliminated jobs that required strength or manual dexterity.

Today's technologies threaten to usurp jobs done by 'brain workers', such as accountancy, drafting legal documents or translation. Some claim that artificial intelligence will wipe out many jobs requiring even more intellectual input. It is not yet clear whether new jobs will emerge for the people made redundant. Certainly, employment is now high in most western countries, but many of the new jobs that people take are less secure and less well paid than those on offer previously.

What are the implications for you? My advice is to follow the most interesting opportunities that open up for you. Start with what really excites you. Picking a currently fashionable subject for employment could be short-sighted. It may no longer be in demand by the time you graduate from university. One insurance policy is to acquire, in addition to your degree, a skill that is likely to remain in demand. After they complete degrees some graduates enrol in community colleges to obtain such skills.

You should expect to return to part-time study – much of it online - throughout your lives. I recommend it.

My own part-time education, after I'd got my doctorate and was working as an academic, was a Master's in Educational Technology. It had a greater impact on my subsequent career and vocation than any of my previous studies.

Inequality

My second topic is inequality. This is a preoccupation for most countries, which is partly related to the changes in the world of work that I have just talked about. I refer primarily to inequality of wealth and income both between countries and, particularly, within countries. In most countries, the incomes and wealth of those at the top have increased far faster than those in the middle or at the bottom.

If this topic interests you I recommend a book by Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st Century*. Inequality has been a feature of the human condition ever since we started living in settled communities. If we are particularly aware of the increase in inequality today it is because, for most of the 20th

century, from 1914 to about 1983, inequality actually declined, which was unusual. But since 1983 inequality has risen steadily - although it may now have reached a plateau.

Scheidel analyses the events in history that have led to a decline in inequality. He reviews four phenomena, which he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are:

- Mass mobilisation warfare
- Transformative revolutions
- State failure and system collapse
- Severe epidemics.

His discouraging conclusion is that only mass mobilisation warfare, such as World Wars I & II in the last century and epidemics like the Black Death in the mid-14th century, are really effective in reducing inequality for long. The French revolution had little long-term impact on the distribution of wealth and those countries that experienced communist revolutions are today among the most unequal on earth.

Later in your lives you may well contribute to inequality yourselves through what is called 'associative mating'. If *The Economist* newspaper is in your library, look at the issue of August 18th.

You will learn that 200 million people use online dating services every month. More than a third of marriages in the US start with an online match-up and 70% of same-sex relationships start online. This reinforces the trend, already driven by the expansion of universities, for richer people to marry richer people and poorer people to marry poorer people. Online dating may also increase the diversity of match-ups on other dimensions, such as race, but that is another story.

A fascinating book that puts another spin on this is *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* by David Goodhart. He divides people into two broad groups: the 'Somewheres' who are rooted in a locality and usually do not have a university education; and the 'Anywheres', who have a higher education and have spent time outside their own countries.

I imagine that most of you are 'Somewheres' on the way to becoming 'Anywheres'. Goodhart explains the election of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit vote in the UK – and would no doubt include current developments here in Italy – as the revolt of the 'Somewheres' against living in a world whose ethos and politics are determined by the 'Anywheres'.

In this case inequality is not just inequality of wealth, although that is a factor too, but a feeling of inequality between different groups in the control of their own lives. These feelings of inequality are the major driver of populist politics.

Truth

I turn now to a challenge that is more abstract but even more present in our lives: what is truth and what is true?

Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a 'word of the year'. For 2016 that word was 'post-truth'. They define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Their example is the sentence: "In this era of post-truth politics, it is easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire."

'Fake news' is most pervasive example of post-truth politics. Fake news undermines serious media coverage and makes it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories. An analysis by BuzzFeed found that the top 20 fake news stories about the 2016 U.S. presidential election received more engagement on Facebook than the top 20 election stories from 19 major media outlets.

Fake news and social media feed on each other because, as the BuzzFeed analysis suggests, fake news stories can generate more advertising revenue than true stories.

Perhaps, now that the European Union has clamped down on their abuse of privacy, social media have now passed their peak in revenue and users. Nevertheless, you will all have to develop your strategies for dealing with social media to ensure that you are not misled.

The post-truth society is a challenge for you at UWC Adriatic. Apart from developing strategies for dealing with social media, what role can a truth-seeking school play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?

One role is to create many more arenas for debate – arenas that are open and inclusive so as to give a voice to those who feel left out. UWCs should be trust building as well as truth seeking. As the Rector of the University of Oslo puts it, "in our age of turbulence these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined."

Here at UWC Adriatic you have several advantages for fulfilling this role as truth seekers.

First, you are a very diverse community. Second, you are a residential community. These two qualities mean that you have plenty of opportunities to confront your differences, to understand each other and to build a more nuanced version of the truth than you might do individually. Third, because you are doing the IB Diploma, you have a course called '*Theory of Knowledge*' in which you can tackle this issue directly. This course is a chance to gain a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments and become more skilled at detecting fake news.

Trust

I promised to say a bit more about trust

Loss of trust in institutions is another feature of our times. This can be a gradual process. Over 50 years the trust that Americans have in government has declined from 80% to 20%. Trust in government is one of many measures that the Economist Intelligence Unit conflates to produce its annual democracy index. In 2016, for the first time, the US no longer ranked among the world's 19 'full democracies', but has been demoted to 'flawed democracy'.

In his book, *Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukuyama (1995) demonstrated persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly to the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions.

Some countries flourish because strangers learned to trust one another when signing contracts, allowing them to do deals outside the circles of family, tribal or in-group kinship relied upon in low-trust societies. Contrast Sweden and Sicily or Norway and Nigeria.

Populism is the political expression of these trends away from truth and trust. It combines nostalgia for the past, post-truth rhetoric, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite.

Populism can develop on either side of the conventional left/right political spectrum. Its common factor is an attempt to mobilise ordinary people against elites that are perceived to be self-serving. Right-wing populism also accuses these elites of coddling a third group, usually immigrants and other minorities.

Trump and Sanders stood for the right-wing and left-wing versions of populism in the 2016 US election campaign. In Europe, the right wing has the National Front (now renamed the Rassemblement national or National Rally) in France and UKIP in Britain, while the left wing has Podemos and Syriza in Spain and Greece. Here in Italy the Five Star Movement calls itself populist and espouses policies that blend policies from left and right with environmentalism mixed in.

The blend of policies in the Five Star Movement reminds us that today the conventional political divide between left and right may be less significant than the divide between open and closed. Recent votes in a number of countries indicate that some of their voters want their societies to become more closed. Two countries in North America, Canada and the USA, are diverging dramatically on the spectrum from open to closed.

Here are two symptoms of the threats to truth and trust when societies and countries become more closed.

First, 'expert' was used as a pejorative term in the 2016 referendum and election contests in the UK and the USA. British Leave-the-EU campaigners told people to disbelieve expert projections about the impact of Brexit, whether from economists, newspaper columnists or diplomats. That bad-mouthing of expert opinion still continues even as the damaging consequences of Brexit become clearer by the day.

Some Brexiteers cheered the post-referendum resignation of the UK's representative in Brussels, Sir Ivan Rogers, the top expert on UK-EU relations. In his farewell letter to staff he wrote: "I hope you will continue to challenge ill-founded arguments and muddled thinking and that you will never be afraid to speak the truth to those in power". He added "I hope that you will continue to be interested in the views of others, even where you disagree with them, and in understanding why others act and think in the way that they do". I encourage you all to take those words to heart.

Conclusion

Let me conclude and then hear from you. We live in paradoxical times.

On the one hand the situation of humankind is better than it has ever been. If you doubt that, read a little book by the Swedish historian Johan Norberg: *Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*. On many dimensions, we have made enormous progress in giving people around the world better lives, not just over past centuries but over the decades since the times that today's older populists look back on as the 'good old days'.

On the other hand, we are living through what Edward Luce calls *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*. For many people of my generation that is a disaster. I was born in the year after the attack on Pearl Harbour that helped to end the Second World War by bringing the United States into the fray. Until now the predominant world view has been based on the consensus that emerged after World War II to prevent such global conflicts from happening again. That consensus created the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a global financial system. In other words, the liberal international framework that is now under attack from many directions.

People like me tend to hope for a future that rebuilds that liberal framework. But you must develop your own views. As you come to assess the good and the bad in the history of humankind you will, I hope, become the makers of a renewal that no one can now foresee.

The reality is that history stumbles and staggers on the road to freedom, a winding path that promises not merely a return to the nostalgic comforts of liberal democracy, but the prospect of something even better. Please devote yourselves to that exciting prospect!