Monday, November 12, 2018

Role for the Youth

**Democracy and Rights** –

United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore.

# **introduction**

I am very grateful to the **University of Manchester** for the gift of this conversation. Thank you for the kind introduction. (Professor Ken McPhail, Deputy Head of School and Director of Research, Alliance Manchester Business School, and in anticipation, Dr Jess Gifkins, Lecturer in International Relations, School of Social Sciences.) I want also to take this moment to thank my wonderful colleague Rajat Khosla for all that he has done to bring us into this forum.

## **Manchester & the City**

That here in Manchester, we are choosing to consider together prospects for a more intentional shaping of the dynamic relationship between democracy and young people feels pertinent of course but poignant also.

As this University’s own Professor Yaron Matras has revealed, for its population size given the number of languages spoken - **Manchester is one of the** world’s **most diverse cities**:– from “curry mile to gay village” – its broad embrace of identities, its riches of traditions and cultures here found at home and its proud history of embracing the stranger and the strange (Madchester?), from a human rights standpoint, this city has always been ahead of its time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A city ahead of its time – *a practiced sprawler; an early ad****o****pter; an accepter at the frontline* and *a most livable city* - engaging change around and within it – sometimes, just so cruelling, oft times just so compassionately – and like the world’s other great metropolises Manchester struggles too with modern forms of age old afflictions - injustice, inequality, insecurity.

In other words, this is a city made global by its realities – its multiple identities, its bruising awful shocks, by virtue of its successes, by curse of its failings. Manchester may aim to “*become a top 20 “global city” by 2035*” – but is already, in and of the global – whether from that there is to be drawn pride or regret.

## **Manchester & the University**

It matters too that we meet under shelter of a University. We will talk soon of the pillars of principled democracy – and of the white ants gnawing away its foundations – but let’s affirm from the outset that a pillar of democratic strength – one that must not be left off the page of our examination - is the University itself.

This perspicacious, oft political, porous proximity which is the *university in the city* is as old as our memories are long – a relationship based in rights upheld and responsibilities borne. This is as established first centuries ago:

It was exactly at this time of the year, almost a millennium ago, that following violent attacks against students, and having barricaded themselves in the streets of Paris’ Latin Quarter, political action saw teacher and student form a union, or, as it was in the Latin of the time, a **universitas**.

The following day, ***the newly formed Universitas of the Masters and Students of Paris*** directly petitioned the king to demand greater protection of their rights. Taken aback it seems by their audacious insistence, King Phillipe first made to refuse them. Their response? - *"Then we shall shake the dust of the streets of Paris from the hems of our gowns."*

As a universitas their departure was a price the king knew the city simply could not afford. And so, the members of the Universitas – the University - emerged in shelter - more protected as rights-ful residents central to the city and to its underliing polity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Have you seen the far more recent reports that, following the campaign and election of a far-right, populist president, more than 20 of Brazil’s universities have been invaded by military police intent on confiscation of teaching materials, especially those dealing with anti-fascist history and activism?

As those - the world over – who are denouncing this are asserting, academic freedom – the universitas - *“is a linchpin not only of independent and objective research, but of a functioning democracy....”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Some it seems do not consider the ecology of fundamental freedoms to be the life blood of this unique union that is teachers, youth, city and public participation. But when the university is among the first cabs off the ranks of those targeted for attack by the opponents of freedom, strange – albeit vicious – compliment is paid - in affirmation of exactly that - the central place of that union in our communities and in our demos populous.

Friends,

Thought itself, speech and our multiple expressions as thinking, reflective and analytical beings – these are qualities as inherent to our dignity as human beings as is hunger satisfied or thirst quenched – and they should be defended as the means too of our liberation: the frequency with which the University is subjected to political thuggery; the courageous examples of academics who defend academic freedoms often at cost to their own, and the repeated, irrepressible and unparalleled role that students have played in social movements for liberation down through the years – all must be entered into evidence of the why, how, and when it is that the whereabouts of the University is so central to the form, shape and exercise of democracy.

For the individual, social and political freedoms on which democracy depends, for the quality of systematic collective thought on which its advance relies; for the dissent, debate, engagement and participation that is the very stuff of participatory democracy, the University must be enabled to provide shelter, not shadow. And we need it too. We need it to explore, debate, research and teach in support of those who underpin the very pillars of democracy:

* Lawyers who cherish the rule of law – who will defend equality before the courts and judicial independence;
* Journalists who will love truth; who will prize evidence and protect fact.
* Doctors who will provide dignified access to essential care, regardless of a patient’s identity or social status.
* Scientists who will pursue knowledge without fear or favour, and deploy its fruits for the betterment of a planet under strain, a climate undergoing horrendous change and a people undergoing inconceivable suffering;
* Artists who will disturb, provoke, illuminate and enchant.
* Philosophers who will help erode our ancient habits of, when fearful and anxious, exercising such grave cruelty one against the other.
* Political scientists, artists, dissidents who will speak truth to power and who when their turn at power comes, will listen well when the same is spoken to them.

## **Young people hold the key**

If helping build such competencies on which sturdy inclusive responsive participatory democracy then may stand firm, the University must be understood also as a portal too - opening ways to public political participation for its student body.

As is the case for scientific, literary, artistic, or indeed technological breakthroughs, few political breakthroughs have emerged without the activism of the young:

* William Wilberforce began his political activism aged 21, it was his activism and that of others that led eventually to the Manchester Anti-Slavery Committee petition, which would be signed in 1806 by a remarkable one in five Mancunians.
* Manchester’s Emmeline Pankhurst began her life as an activist in the women's suffrage movement at the age of 14
* Serbia’s Otpory outh movement (Resistance)that ousted war criminal Slobodan Milošević.
* Children scrawled the words “The people want the regime to fall” on a wall in Dara in southern Syria. Protests against their subsequent detention and brutual torture met with the vicious repression and violence for which the now eight years long Syria conflict is so tragically notorious.

From Hong Kong to Venezuela to Turkey to Zimbabwe - student leaders explain “If students don’t stand on the front line of democracy, who else will?”

Globally today we have the largest population of young people the world has ever seen – the largest natural resource for democratic transformation and needed innovation. Yet if we factor in where in the world it is that our young people are most concentrated; if we examine how current political and public policy and practice are treating them; if we look to the world that we non-young are bequeathing to them; then the urgency of acting more decisively for their inclusion – and their democratic engagement - right NOW becomes all too clear – is an unprecedented NOW. Acting NOW so that this enormous reserve of talent and contribution is not denied their rights, but is rather enabled to emerge as influential, engaging energy for positive change.

However, the world’s youth population - the largest by number and percentage ever in human history - the healthiest, most educated, best connected – are today also found concentrated among those who have the least, those with the fewest options. Subjected to grave insecurity. On the front lines of conflict. Populating the roads of escape. Locked in the backrooms of neglect. Kept outside the rooms in which decisions affecting them are made. If we want to – and goodness knows we need to - release talent, creativity and daring - for the sake of positive change – then we have to dismantle this exclusion. We must make of the emerging demographic “youthquake” - selected by Oxford Dictionaries as 2017’s word of the year – a source of hope and an energy for hitherto unknown, unreachable possibilities.

As Einstein – who made his greatest discoveries when young - observed, we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them. We need bring forward new thinkers, different thinkers, younger thinkers.

We certainly cannot afford to continue on with our callous, casual contempt for the “other”; with hatred of the foreigner; baseless distrust of those who look or love or worship differently … with clampdowns on freedom of the press; encroachments on public movement; closure of national borders against people fleeing persecution; the gagging of activists or the deliberate denial of life saving services essential for sexual and reproductive health: The pounding of these malicious fists grows louder and louder on the doors of our dignity, of our privacy, of our mental and physical integrity and against our freedom. And they must be resisted. In this, there is no north or south, no right or left, neither east nor west. There is only the humane and the inhumane.

For it is a fallacy that borders, walls and fences erode our obligations to each other’s rights. Walls within the human family, on a small, distressed planet in a globalized world, home to the largest population of youngest people in all of human history? Walls are untruths. There is no country on this planet, at this time, in this interconnected world, that can rightfully stand apart, bury its head or absent itself from the global table of rights-filled solutions.

Rights? They are simply text – an operating manual if you like – for what it means to be human. Medical science codifies our anatomy, physiology, our musculature. Human rights - the concepts, values and norms – their collectively and internationally negotiated definitions – codify the ways in which each of us is precious, unique, equal.

Human rights do not prevent our diversity – they protect it; don’t limit our diverse expression – they ensure it; don’t restrict our enjoyment of culture, belief or opinion – they guarantee it and, what’s more, human rights set out the terms and conditions under which we may exercise our rights without cost to any other person’s rights.

And, the opposite of human rights upheld? Selfishness, bullying, bigotry, injustice, tyranny and oppression – toxic stepping stones – the perverse paving of pathways to privation, suffering, conflict and, ultimately, atrocity.

Not my parents nor my teachers foresaw silk roads redrawn as China’s “one belt, one road”; trade routes made virtual too; policy pivots reduced to a tweet; the personal no longer merely the private; the local somehow now less geographical and more digital; distance between us contracted down by a so called social media which is so anti-social that actual location is no longer proximity to neighbor and community for many is now mainly about opinions and beliefs – superficial, subjective, short-lived sparks of data thrown out into cyberspace through pages, apps and chat rooms.

Even change itself is changing – accelerating, working at a pace and with a reach for which most of our institutions, leaders, and even our own thought processes are poorly designed and ill equipped.

And add into the mix – global shocks pressing unwanted consequences onto our systems of governance – shocks such as 9/11 and its aftermath AND the 2008 financial crisis – and its consequences.

Our reactions to the callous, dehumanizing impact of terror crimes perpetrated around the world on the one hand, and the callous, dehumanizing impact of fickle financial bubbles burst on the other – have driven us off the path otherwise promised to us - the path to greater dignity and deeper democracy.

Hyper securitization has managed to do to fundamental civil and political freedoms what deep-purse austerity has done to economic and social rights – both rusting away public trust in public institutions just when trust is needed most - forging unstainable distance between democracies’ elites and democracies’ constituents - a distance of experience, expectations, and behavior at a time when it is connection we need most.

As the Edleman Global Trust report puts it – “We’re at the end of the lifespans of the men and women who stormed the beaches of Normandy, who saved the world and built the (U.S.) liberal-led world order. Now that order seems to be unraveling ...”

Osama Bin Laden would have been delighted by the ways in which the post 9/11 surveillance culture has intensified to the point where the very pillars of democratic society – civil society, an open and independent press, an independent judiciary, free and fair elections - are eroded – under attack even from those elected democratically – with even humanitarian action criminalized.

But no doubt he would have found further justification for his cause, from austerity measures that have cut away at standards of living for those who had the least, have deepened inequalities, have grown from this toxic resentment for our global scape goats – migrants - those who are “coming to take our jobs”, “to rob us of our social security”, to “strip us of our identity”.

We know the root cause of these policy perversions lies with malicious action by non-state actors: repeated cruelty of violent extremist groups and repeated greed of accountability-evading capital: each thanks to global dynamics being now beyond the effective reach of national law; neither containable by a single nation state and yet, their actions leaving no population untouched, as is evident for all to see in opinion poll and ballot box.

Under force of global shocks and against a backdrop of accelerating change international, national and local systems are not just being challenged – they are no longer able to work as people need them to. But all the wall-building, all the xenophobic hardening of borders and these florid fictions of national superiority – each is less cure than complaint.

As Einstein – who made his greatest discoveries when young - said, we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Instead, we need new thinkers, different thinkers, younger thinkers.

Those who can reinvent, innovate and reinvigorate democratic political practice for this era of global finance, big data, extreme inequality, hyper securitization, mass migration and ecological upheaval – into a system that subordinates even global economic and technological delivery systems to a governance infrastructure rooted in the supreme dignity of all people.

Friends,

Sitting one day in Nicaragua with a 14 year old girl – a baby on her lap, a child of three at her knee – she told me her life story. The baby’s father – her boyfriend – was no longer living with her - having been violent to her. With her two children she took flight - staying temporarily in a youth shelter she explained that her older child was the product of rape at the hands of her uncle. At age 10, she had sought termination of the pregnancy but was denied it by the state.

Throughout our conversation, she cried about how much she had wanted to stay in school, of how she dreamt of becoming a nurse. But she explained too that she was speaking to me for a reason - she believed that people like me could make a difference … so that no other girl should ever be made to go through what she had gone through.

Young people, we – the non-young - may not believe in you. At times, you likely won’t believe in you either. But she believed in you.

Young people must be allowed in, and we oldies must step out. We must step out of the way - so that youth have the space and opportunity to take the dynamics of this interdependent, interconnected world of change and twist and turn with them so that opportunities are maximized and threats minimized - so that preventable human suffering is eliminated; so that hate is no more the basis of public or private action; so that the ecology of our planet is rescued from our greed. So that innovation in technology, science, philosophy and art literature, music can evolve us into a greater compassion, greater humility, and a less self-first approach to daily and global action.

70 years ago, in his dystopian novel “1984”, the same year that he wrote his last article for the Manchester Evening News, George Orwell set out in words the nightmare of a State rooted in hyper-securitization and relentless in its pursuit of “thought crime”.

But in that same year, 70 years ago Member States of the newly formed United Nations set out its antidote - proclaiming in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - that “if we are not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”

On this, we can rest still and for this we must stand up. Yes, they do hunt down the peace-loving dissident. They do lock up the truth-telling journalists. They do bar the law-loving lawyers. And they may once more “torch every book; char every page of reason; turn every loving and tolerant word to ash.” But when we stand up together in and for rights – we are incombustible.

Friends, this University’s graduation celebration is called “commencement”. It has nothing of course to do with commencing life – for yours has well begun. Rather, its origins are in a rite of passage to a new equality between the teacher and those once taught: in which, rather than continuing to sit at a lower table, the new graduate sits now with faculty and alumni - at the same table - at a *commensa*, at a common table for all.

In defense and pursuit of that precious **common table for all**, we also need Manchester **universitas** within Manchester City to deploy all effort for a more fully Manchester United - to offer to a world so near by and a world so far beyond, a lived example of what it really means to bring rights home.

1. These first paragraphs owe much to the June 2017 [article](https://www.citymetric.com/horizons/one-most-culturally-diverse-cities-uk-saskia-sassen-manchester-3090) by [*Saskia Sassen*](https://theconversation.com/profiles/saskia-sassen-288333),*Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at*[*Columbia University*](http://theconversation.com/institutions/columbia-university-1026) *and*[*Shoba Arun*](https://theconversation.com/profiles/shoba-arun-265019)*, is senior lecturer in sociology at*[*Manchester Metropolitan University*](http://theconversation.com/institutions/manchester-metropolitan-university-860)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With thanks to Professor Lynn Marry Nelson http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/universities.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/01/we-deplore-this-attack-on-freedom-of-expression-in-brazils-universities [↑](#footnote-ref-3)