Island of hope

Norway has just marked the second anniversary of the terrorist massacre on the island of Utøya, and the bombing of the Oslo government centre. The trial of the perpetrator, Anders Behring Breivik, boiled down, in the end, to legalistic arguments over his sanity. The trial also served wider purposes. It established an official record of the horrific events themselves, provided emotional 'closure' for the injured and bereaved and allowed both Norway and other countries to assess how to avoid such tragedies in future.

What the trial did not do was to examine critically the motivation of the perpetrator, and provide any kind of collective response to it. Whether or not his writings are considered to be the work of an insane person, they cannot simply be dismissed. Breivik's manifesto, widely circulated on the internet and put forward as his justification for the crime, raises many uncomfortable issues. Setting aside its literary defects, the fact that much of it was plagiarized from other sources, and the chilling knowledge that the act of mass murder that it foreshadows actually occurred, many of the ideas that it enshrines are widely shared and believed on the political fringes. They represent an emphatic rejection of the democratic and humanitarian norms accepted by most modern societies, and must not go unanswered. As scientists, we have a special duty here, since academia was one of his principal 'targets'.

A recurrent theme of Breivik's writings is the assertion that our universities are engaged in a systematic conspiracy to destroy the liberal culture that is their own foundation stone. The principal tool of this conspiracy is held to be the concept that all cultures and philosophies are equally worthy. By thus validating exclusivist ideologies that do not themselves respect this principle, universities are depicted as opening the door to rule by a self-appointed elite that would impose on us by force its own

belief system, denying the freedoms of others, and eradicating the democratic pluralism that has become the hallmark of our free society.

In this view, the ideology that presents this threat most nakedly and most threateningly is that of 'political Islam', which is portrayed as plotting to take over the world. This fear is shared by many others, even if they do not embrace Breivik's murderous methods to express it. It permeates even into the political mainstream. The last Dutch government was sustained in office for almost two years by a party that seeks to end immigration from Muslim countries, to require all citizens to register their ethnicity and to close down Islamic schools. In France, former President Nicolas Sarkozy asserted, in a televised campaign debate with his opponent, that he would allow only an Islam 'of France' but not an Islam 'in France', raising the same spectre, of a fifth column seeking to exploit society's tolerance in the name of an intolerant ideology. Sarkozy's university reform was perceived in many quarters as an attempt to thwart the same imaginary left-liberal hegemony of academia, which Breivik accuses of preparing the ground for an Islamist takeover of society.

Throughout history, our civilization has wrestled with successive versions of this conundrum. In the middle ages, the Church used the power of kings and emperors to burn unbelievers at the stake, whilst at the same time the ancient universities were giving voice to discordant opinions, including those emanating from that very same Church. Even today's Catholic Church has issued warnings to its adherents to beware of the cultural relativism that places all religions on an equal footing. Believers can participate in debate, but the eventual aim should nevertheless be to reconcile all competing belief-systems to the divine will. In modern times, liberal critiques of monarchy and theocracy often led to even

more brutal regimes, which came to power by exploiting parliamentary freedoms that were then swept aside.

But, when it comes to our universities, the alleged threat to constitutional order is invisible to me and to virtually everyone else who works, studies or conducts research in academia—with the possible exception of some sociology departments still rooted in the ideas of 1968. I have yet to meet a molecular biologist of the Islamic or any other faith, who regards the quest to figure out how cells, organelles or genes work as a device to impose any particular theological view on the rest of society. In fact, I don't know any who consider faith as even a minor factor in their work (other than possibly misplaced faith in their PhD students or supervisor). Maybe there are a few anarchists that would regard the interactive, self-regulating gene networks revealed by systems biology to be a vindication of Bakunin; or Buddhists who interpret them as signs of the interdependence of everything. But systems biologists themselves do not interpret their work thus. Fanaticism represents no real threat to academia, simply because it doesn't even figure in the landscape of science.

Doubt is indispensable to scientific enquiry. Whilst holding to a given version of 'the truth', we must be prepared to admit that alternative interpretations might one day supersede that 'truth'. We spend much of our time dreaming up those novel interpretations and designing experiments to test them. This is not cultural relativism or woolly thinking. It is the scientific method at work, the fundamental condition for knowledge to progress. As we mourn the victims of Breivik's rampage, we need resolutely to denounce the twisted conspiracy theories behind his crime, and defend the tradition of open scholarship that underpins all our freedoms.

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