

The Rise of Populism Could Persist as Western society and its Academic Institutions Fail to Promote Critical Thought

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Athanasios Gkoutzioulis](#)

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On the 4th of May, Donald Trump became the Republican presidential nominee while on the 23rd of June, Nigel Farage's (and Arron Bank's) campaign largely contributed to Brexit to the surprise of international public opinion. Trump's or Farage's triumph does not necessarily reflect the rise of populism or demagoguery – the spectre of this has always lurked within societies to a greater or a lesser extent. It simply shows how Trump and Farage capitalized on the absence of critical thinking and the uncritical digestion of their electoral campaign messages.

This can strongly influence our fast moving world, where the media 'rule' and information is not carefully assessed. This lack of critical thinking can also threaten democracy since voters can be lured to adopt misleading approaches to politics and vote without scrutinizing complex [political issues](#).

Academia cannot sufficiently help to protect democracy or insulate society from the shortcomings emerging from the absence of critical thought. Universities today accommodate a rich curriculum. Nevertheless, lately they appear to put more emphasis on improving their facilities and their student's employment prospects, neglecting the enrichment of their students' critical skills.



Critical thought, however, can be very important in today's world in two ways:

- Firstly, it challenges the explanatory strength of contemporary political debates, which instead of vigorously analysing complicated political matters, often rest on citation of (bogus) statistical reports. This tactic utilizes the (supposedly) self-evident explanatory value of numbers (and the easiness of their media dissemination) in a misleading way, something we have witnessed during the [Brexit debate](#).
- Secondly, it highlights that in today's world complicated political issues can rarely be analysed in depth. Political debating is often premised on a polarization between fixed points of reference (e.g. Republicans vs Democrats, Conservatives vs Liberals, etc.), whereas the complexity of such issues often touches upon the grey areas between these fixed standpoints, the foundations of which are rarely interrogated or challenged.

The first issue has already been stressed before. [Commentators](#) revealed how politicians often poison statistics (using the [last General Election](#) in Britain as an example), demonstrating how the analysis of political ideas is replaced by a policy calculus, which is based on dubious numerical figures. This shows that politicians who use specific statistical variables which suit their argumentation simply prioritize their electoral triumph and, without necessarily lying, they have no interest in seeking political truths via the interrogation of complicated political matters. Critical thinking would certainly help to unmask this.

The second issue reveals how the clash of political ideas assumes a counter-productive dimension as contemporary debating often relies on polarization, which does not challenge the fixity of each side's truth regimes. Such

polarization is premised on *securely* fixed points of reference, which strip the individuals of their critical skills and transform them into supporters rather than active political thinkers. Such form of political debating threatens democracy as the voters, who are discouraged from challenging these *securely* fixed truth regimes, can be easily exploited. Formal institutions such as universities or political parties are structured in a way that cannot prevent this counterproductive trend. This prolongs the lack of critical thinking and the perpetuation of demagoguery, a real plague for democracy.

Critical thinking can only stem from a sense of uncertainty or *insecurity*, which is stimulated by challenging *securely* fixed points of view and posing ethico-political dilemmas. The word *security* stems from the Latin word *securitas* meaning free from danger or from an uncertainty which triggers anxiety. In other words, it is freedom from doubt or anxiety which triggers confidence, certainty and fixity. Thus, the term *security* portrays the feeling of anxiety, uncertainty and doubt as counter-productive and fabricates an artificial (if not illusional) form of certainty. In that respect, *security* becomes a concept which aims to soothe our anxieties, fears and doubts, acting as painkiller for our *insecure* dispositions, which in fact stimulate critical thinking. Unlike *securitas*, the (Ancient) Greek term for *security* is *Asphaleia* (Ἀσφάλεια), a term which accommodates society's insecure dispositions in a productive way. *A-Sphallo* means avoiding (A-) to *fall* or to *fail* (-Sphallo), a term which far from nourishing certainty highlights a productive yet fragile condition of critical self-doubt, stressing the interdependence of security with insecurity. As [Michael Dillon](#) highlights, the term *Asphaleia* demonstrated a process alongside a fixed standpoint – a struggle against any false standing so as to prevent society from living a lie or perpetuating one. One can argue that this necessity to first feel insecurity in order to tackle it is dangerous or counterproductive in itself – that it perhaps prevents certainty and complicates decision-making, and that this can only take place in an utopian world.

Interestingly, the spectre of demagoguery was actively tackled in Ancient Greek democracies with the mandatory attendance of the public to watch tragic performances. This was an influential ritual towards effectively helping society to debate ethical and political dilemmas. Though Ancient Greek tragedies did not always succeed in enriching all citizens' critical thinking skills, this ritual hardly back-fired in Ancient Greece either. As Thucydides argued, demagogues still existed (he portrays Alcibiades as demagogue for convincing the Athenians to invade Sicily). At least the Ancient Greeks acknowledged the dangers of demagoguery and the risks it poses to freedom of thought, working instead to mandatorily instill critical skills within the public, *Asphaleia* armed citizens against manipulation and stimulated their critical skills.

But today's electoral campaigns and political debates are not driven by the desire to analyse complicated political ideas or reveal political dilemmas which expose the vulnerabilities of our *securely* fixed political perspectives. Moreover, these political campaigns, as [Allan Banks](#) (founder of Leave.UK campaign) mentions, should aim to connect with people emotionally (praising Trump's success), dismissing sociopolitical facts and complicated political analyses. They simply aim at an electoral victory, through a political strategy which obscures sociopolitical complexities and the notion of *Asphaleia*, which could give rise to active critical thinking.

Many respectable [analysts](#) associate Trump's success with his non-ideological stance and his campaigns that avoid complicated political ideas. [Others](#), associate him to the unwillingness of the Republican Party to cope with superficial campaigning or with an ideological void created by the party's reluctance to accommodate a political discourse on ambiguous issues, which would otherwise challenge the party's stance on racism, tax cuts and climate change. These analysts suggest that Trump has managed to win a lot of conflicted Republicans after revising some rigid Republican claims, such as increasing Federal spending on welfare, while adjusting his rhetoric to meet the mood of a disgruntled public.

Trump, however, is not necessarily interested in evaluating ambiguous grey zones. He is still deeply conservative and isolationist, particularly with foreign policy issues as indicated by his white ethnocentric, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and anti-feminist rhetoric. With statements such as "Make America great again" and "Our country doesn't win anymore", he fails to interrogate the complicated nature of issues such as the economy, or America's identity. This rhetoric is devoid of any critical thinking and again relies on a simple black-and-white outlook churned

out to supporters, who Trump expects, in turn, will fail to use any critical thinking to haul him to account.

Just as today's formal political debating appears to be in *crisis*, our education systems are structured in a way which doesn't appear to effectively help stem this trend of the majority public favouring such simple polarised viewpoints, which obscures the complexity of many political issues. As a lecturer of international relations, I am obviously concerned as to how academic discussions can be improved to enrich my students' critical skills, helping them to cope with populism, demagoguery and poor political debating.

I teach them the skills to be able to debunk the catchy lines re-circulated by the media or to challenge the analytical value of (bogus) statistical reports often met in the press or think-tanks. Students of top universities form an influential part of public opinion as they often progress into top jobs in society. Their critical-thinking is vital not only for political science, but towards helping to guide society for the greater good, since such skills are also nurtured within society itself. But, with critical thinking as a taught discipline limited to the modern day university, my fear is that academia is still unable to effectively help society to arm itself against the same risk of demagoguery.

As well as this, our next generation of critical thinkers are not only in the minority, they are also under threat within academia. There's a trend among the UK's universities to "enhance the student experience". Since 2011, the Universities UK report stresses "Students want to know that they are getting value for their money". But this value is being measured not only in intellectual but also in materialist terms echoing a consumerist ethos.

According to one more recent [report](#) published in 2014 by the Higher Education Academy, the increase of tuition fees affected the character of the students' interactions with their universities, marking a shift towards improving the student experience. In that respect, the universities focused on increasing their expenditures on new facilities, technologies, digital learning and enhanced post-graduate career-support services. Such increased emphasis on employability triggered employment-related curriculum changes, which correspond to the students' demand for immediate employment rather than longer-term career possibilities or the cultivation of useful skills such as critical thinking. According to the same report, due to the rise of the students' fees, the more assertive voice of the students is acknowledged, cultivating the perception of the 'student as customer' and the recruitment of managers to cope with these trends.

The new trends stemming from "the improvement of the student experience" are not necessarily wrong. Ideally, however, investment towards teaching should be equal to that given to facilities. It appears that the recruitment of more managers offsets a (materialist) race to be the best through facilities rather than an equal investment in teaching skills to nurture genuine intellectual thought. These trends leave our universities as nothing more than examination centers and (employability) certificate providers with little given back to society itself. If our universities are the only place where the public can learn how to critically think and assess serious issues, then they need restructuring and greater support.

Critical thinking can be cultivated through longer, thought-provoking tutorials and via the recruitment of more lecturers (with appropriate contracts) to accommodate them. However, it has already been [stressed](#) that only [24 per cent](#) of the academic workforce are now tenured or tenure-track. The rest suffer from the [sub-poverty wages](#) of adjunct faculty, their lack of job security and the [growing legions](#) of unemployed and under-employed PhDs.

Impressive buildings, state of the art facilities, links to the industry and the job market add to the prestige of universities, but prestige without substance is vacuous. The universities' corporate and materialist shift should not come at the expense of teaching and their mission to serve for the greater good of society. The new trends, which encourage the treatment of students as consumers who strive to enter the job market at the expense of enriching their critical skills, are counter-productive both for society and the corporate world.

Critical skills can transform today's students into responsible citizens and professionals who are willing to adopt or scrutinize (un)ethical codes of conduct, highlighting issues of corporate responsibility and labour rights (just like [Brunello Cucinelli](#)). These critical skills can transform them into responsible voters too, ready to scrutinize

complicated political issues and shield themselves from demagogy and the rise of figures like Trump.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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