



## Anniversary speech

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### Seeing eye to eye: On Castles and Cities

Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,  
ladies and gentlemen,

Universities are great news for cities. Not only in terms of employment or as institutes of learning but especially in terms of city life. Students bring energy to the city. Despite all concerted efforts to tighten the curricula, the student's energy and willing display of identity and ambition, continues to make public space flourish. In that sense Utrecht is not different from Groningen, Berkeley or Stellenbosch.

But cities are great news for universities as well. At the end of the European middle ages, the revival of European cities and the revival of learning were intimately interconnected, as Thomas Bender describes in his *The University and the City*. In an era of castles, without freedom of thought, European universities prospered in the dynamic life of the early modern cities. In the hustle bustle of cities, town and gown went hand in hand. That was how the Enlightenment was born, that is how our habitus of inquiry and reasoned deliberation - something we may now take for granted - was conquered on the reign of the aristocracy and the church. Universities have been urban institutions ever since.

Yet over the years town and gown have fought bitter battles too. Take for instance the 'battle of Saint Scholastica Day'. On February 10th, 1355 an argument in an Oxford pub got out of

hand. For days Oxford was the site of skirmishes and clashes between 'towners' and 'gowners'. While this was perhaps the most famous 'meet up' of town and gown in the early history of the university, it was by no means a unique occasion. Indeed, in 1209 after yet another spell of conflict of townies and gownies, some Oxford scholars decided to leave the town and relocate in the market town of Cambridge. They set up a new university but, as students came to attend the first courses, so re-emerged the conflicts between town and gown.

Other famous universities had their conflicts with townies as well. Take the case of Yale University, where in 1841 students got into a violent conflict with city firefighters. "After Yale students attacked the firehouse and destroyed equipment, a town mob threatened to burn the college." Those were the days.

Over the centuries students and townspeople have exchanged bricks, bullets and snowballs, and have used fists, knives and clubs to fight turf.

Hence it is fair to say the relation between city and university is both deeply productive, and ridden with tensions at the same time. What can explain this tension? Perhaps the strains on the relation between town and gown is not so strange if you take into account that universities may have been located in or nearby cities but studied and discussed matters that extended way beyond the city perimeter. After all, it is the history of the universe that is written in mathematics.

Moreover, universities have always been open institutions, attracting students and faculty from far away. Oxford University mentions the arrival of Emo of Friesland around 1190, as significant fact to its foundation, suggesting he may have been the world's first overseas student.

Oxford was open to the world but lived with its back to the city at the same time. Oxford,

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/history/early-records>

<sup>2</sup> [http://archives.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/01\\_03/town\\_gown.html](http://archives.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/01_03/town_gown.html), traced via [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town\\_and\\_gown](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_and_gown)

arguably one of the most anti-urban universities of the world, saw the empire as its playing field, not the town. When I climbed the stairs of the School of Geography to meet my supervisor in the late 1980s, all the relics from the British empire greeted me, from stuffed wild animals, to globes and photos of heroic colonial mapping exercises.

The tension between town and gown is thus both cultural and spatial. The life of students coming from far away to enjoy the freedom within the university, stood at times in sharp contrast with the harsh predicament of towners living next door. But then consider the difference in their perspective on the future. For a student the university was a place of possibility, hope and ambition. Towners on their part noted cohort after cohort of students with loud, sometimes obnoxious behavior, without the slightest illusion they could join the ranks of those who so obviously enjoyed themselves while securing an excellent starting position in society at the same time.

But what about the relationship of town and gown in our age? Cities recognize universities as 'anchor' of their regional employment or economic development strategy. Universities on their part acknowledge the importance of the quality of 'place' for their own attractiveness. The collaboration in institutions such as the 'economic development boards' is witness to this spirit of collaboration between town and gown. We are seeing eye to eye.

Yet is this harmony to last? According to the latest wisdom and parlor we live in a world of bubbles, platforms and alternative facts. A discourse in which science is not automatically a cornerstone of deliberation and decision making. Most of us gaze in disbelief.

The discourse of 'alternative facts' is easy to ridicule. And that is what we do to perfection. Stephen Colbert, John Oliver or our very own Arjan Lubach have a field day. But satire is often a reinforcement of the world of bubbles.

After all, we mock the latest glitch of Trump spokespersons Kellyanne Conway or Sean Spicer in the extended circle of colleagues and friends, via What's App, Twitter or Facebook. We ridicule as a defense mechanism, seeking reconfirmation from like-minded spirits that an outside event is 'weird'. Yet I suppose with Lubach we also see the return of the jester in our politics. It is *Lof der Zotheid* in a new disguise. The jester speaks the truth, Erasmus observed. In the current mediatized world of bubbles the jester is regarded a trustworthy source of information.

In the university many of us now retreat to the bastion of the world of facts. Be fact-regarding, confine statements to evidence-based logic. Sure, 'everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts, as the American Senator Daniel P. Moynihan allegedly said. Yet I am uncomfortable with such a retreat. Moreover, I think it will prove to be ineffective.

I think it would be a mistake to withdraw into the castle of facts. It provides a false sense of safety and it denies decades of scholarship. Many conflicts over facts have to do with the way in which authorities relate to people who are affected by particular findings, whether it is in early controversies over waste disposal or in recent concerns about vaccination of 12 years old girls in the Netherlands or earth quake damage in Groningen.

For me the university is not simply about facts but, above all, about wisdom and understanding. In this vain, university scholarship is to give meaning to our current situation and help people cope with what Anthony Giddens once called our 'ontological insecurity'. People do not know where they stand and if there is a place for them in the world, let alone in the future. I think it is up to the university community to take an active role.

Let's take climate change as an example. The political issue is not about persuading people about the facts. The issue is how to provide viable pathways that can help curb climate

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/history?wssl=1>

change. The issue is not to differentiate between scientific facts and public opinions. That is implicitly suggesting society should simply listen to science. That era of simple authority is over. And let's celebrate that it is over! It is over because of our considerable success in educating people that people now dare to dispute scientific facts. Sociologist Bram de Swaan coined a term for it: proto professionalisation. With a little help from Google everybody can reach a sufficient level of information to at least raise questions that are to the point. This happens not only to the scientist, it is something the general practitioner experiences everyday in his or her doctor's office, just as the school teacher or the politician.

We should acknowledge people feel threatened by action to curb climate change. Bizarre as it may seem, people may feel more threatened by policies to delimit climate change than by climate change itself. They have a feeling policy is taking things away from them. It enhances their ontological insecurity. The question is therefore much more how people can be provided with a way forward.

I notice more and more the similarity between the 1950s and our age. In the 1950s doom and gloom was prevalent. The threat of a nuclear conflict was in the air. An elite was out of touch. Academics were searching for their role. In that age academics like Harold Lasswell or C. Wright Mills called for academics to take up a role as 'public intellectuals'. Provide perspective on the situation, do solid empirical work to make sure government money was spent at the right policy programmes. Dare to go against the grain and speak out on issues of race, even in a period in which politics was anxious and the population at large must have felt a similar ontological insecurity to what people feel now.

In that age C. Wright Mills wrote a remarkable short book, *The Sociological Imagination* in which he argued that the university is also an institution that should help understand the relationship of history and biography. Mills introduced the conceptual pair of 'private troubles' and

'public issues'. His call was upon intellectuals to meaningfully connect the two. 'Private troubles' and 'public issues': I think it is worth revisiting the relation between the two.

So what can be done? Firstly, we should continue to try and 'speak truth to power' (Aron Wildavsky) where we can. We live in an age where people are right about feeling insecure. In a sense it is a quality of public discourse and democracy that citizens no longer swallow the suggestions of an easy way out that keeps getting presented to them by political leaders. Wolfgang Streeck, not a colleague known for his revolutionary inclinations, wrote *Buying Time and How will Capitalism End*. Albeit painful and confrontational, this is good scholarship. But it is not exactly leaving you upbeat.

We now need the meticulous and courageous scholarship that dares to peel the many layers of our current crisis, in search of the sources of instability. Coming to grips with our current predicament gives legitimacy to science beyond the short term. The work of our climate and water scientists, our economists and social scientists is all relevant here. The work of Rosi Braidotti on posthumanist ethics may address a deeper layer but is most certainly is a crucial part of that too.

While speaking truth to power is essential, we should realize that this can be nasty and intimidating in a world of bubbles. Academics who do engage, actually often pay a high price. The castle of facts does not offer protection against attacks via the social media. Who tries to speak truth to power in this age, must, unfortunately, count with personal hate-mail, insults or even threats. I think it is paramount universities actively come up with strategies as to how to protect its faculty in these situations.

Secondly, we should come up with new imaginaries of the future. We live in a period in which many people do not know how to move on. An appeal to facts alone will not do, or is sometimes simply impossible. We must be more courageous. This is a period in which

the university needs to mobilize its power for imagination, providing better understandings of the present and new pathways into the future.

I think we owe it to society to now mobilize our power of intellect to think of alternative possible worlds and of ways to get there. How can we create the imaginaries that give us the mobilizing images, words and calculations, to push for a better world order?

In the 1930s and 1940s intellectuals grouped together. Some searching for the ultimate weapon to stop the Nazis, others to think of a stable postwar order. The likes of Keynes and Beveridge laid out the ideas for a welfare state. It was an imaginary of a desirable future. They could not know if statutory pensions and health insurances for all would be affordable. Yet they drew up the plans and politicians set out to create that world. They did not stay within the university, they engaged but kept an independent mind nevertheless.

Lively characters like Keynes, who occasionally could be seen racing on a motorbike from Cambridge to London to speculate on the stock markets for the benefit of his college, are not easily brought back to life. But we most certainly can enhance the public profile of our universities in helping create better future worlds.

Here science should be reminded that it is hard to think outside the language that we have at our perusal. We speak of rising 'CO<sub>2</sub> levels' or the threshold of 400 'parts-per-million'. Can we simply assume that everybody is going along with implementing a policy package simply to keep 'CO<sub>2</sub> emissions' down? Society is not persuaded by facts, but enticed by perspective. And that too is an academic field of study. Here is the discrepancy brought to the point: we are worried about global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and argue for a stop of oil and gas but the dream of young families is a home organized around a sturdy Boretti gas-fired stove. We are not going to win the fight against climate change if we cannot help to create the imaginaries of the good life

in a postfossil world. We need our very best scientists to come to the fore and collaborate in new, open-minded coalitions.

Universities still need to find their place in the 21st century context. Instead of retreating to the castle, my suggestion is to strengthen our urban strategy; the city, not the castle. Universities emerged in an urban context. It was the city that gave them the protection and freedom to investigate, to probe, to raise naughty questions and pursue trajectories into the unknown, to be profane in an era in which the church sought to keep the lid on the bottle of the Enlightenment.

Now, in an age of bubbles and mediatized politics, an era in which authorities cannot take their power for granted, town and gown can reconnect.

Let's enhance the profile of the university as a place of possibility, hope and ambition. Globally via scholarship about the layers of our current crisis and new imaginaries for a future with perspective; and locally via an extension of the interactions with the city, not only at the board level but across the board.

This relates to a final point. I have shown that town and gown was always about physical relationships. The proximity of the city was not only evident in the many fistfights but was also a precondition for the inventions that changed the world. I think we should return to that physical quality. That may be the best answer to the world of bubbles and mediatized politics. Nothing is as strong as direct interaction. Nothing is more impressive than seeing people directly into the eye. There is lots of merit in enhancing our local and physical profile. Let's prove our worth to the city setting up 'living labs' and helping the city to innovate quicker. Let's value the breakfasts where academics meet entrepreneurs and spark new business propositions. Perhaps it is an idea to experiment with 'weekend schools' where the best and brightest of all Utrecht neighbourhoods can feel the academic freedom and develop their own ambitions at an early age. A final idea is to create a new campus. The city of Utrecht has a

<sup>i</sup> The term was coined by Aron Wildavsky.

unique opportunity right in the heart of the city. The area of Jaarbeurs to Merwede Kanaalzone is close to empty. Here the city could show its ambitions. If the city wants to extend its profile as a knowledge economy the university should be an anchor occupant. Create a new urban campus for those schools that prosper in urban proximity with an iconic building that expresses our openness to the world at its heart. Be centrally present in the urban future of Utrecht. And alleviate the Uithof campus by so doing.

Let's give new meaning to the relation of town and gown. Let the university express its openness to the world and help formulate these new imaginaries of the future, let the university become that beacon of intellect and of hope. Let the university grow as a physical meeting place, a sphere where the town - whether as citizen or as minister, as children of the neighbourhood or as global NGO – is welcome and is actively welcomed by the gown.

Ik heb gezegd.