

Coda: reflections on the politics of openness in a new world order

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Politically, 2016 was a convulsive, tumultuous year. On 23 June, the United Kingdom held a referendum on whether to remain a member of the European Union. On a turnout of 72%, a narrow majority – 52% – voted to ‘Leave’ the EU. The Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who had called the referendum and campaigned to ‘Remain’, had not anticipated defeat and announced his intention to step down the day after. Within a handful of weeks, the Conservatives elected a new leader – Theresa May – who took over as prime minister on 13 July. Although she had supported Remain in the referendum – albeit without much enthusiasm publicly – May now declared that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ and committed her government to triggering Article 50, which would begin the two-year negotiations, and countdown, to Britain’s departure from the EU.

Around the same time, across the North Atlantic, the Republican Party was about to nominate the maverick billionaire Donald Trump as its candidate for the US presidency. Trump had seen off a wide field of ex-governors and senators in a heated campaign for the nomination and now faced the Democratic Party’s presumptive nominee, former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Few at the time imagined the pugnacious, impatient and thin-skinned Trump would defeat a veteran Democratic Party candidate like Clinton. After Britain unexpectedly voted to leave the EU, however, some began to wonder if the unthinkable might now just become possible.

The challenge for Trump remained winning enough electoral college votes to secure the White House, in so-called battleground states

where there live significant minorities whom he repeatedly offended during his chaotic campaign. A month before the November election, a recording surfaced of Trump boasting about his lecherous behaviour towards women. With his campaign seemingly in meltdown, most pollsters and political commentators expected Trump to haemorrhage support, particularly from female Republican voters. Such was the seriousness of his self-inflicted political wounds, some even thought he would resign before election day. The *New York Times* gave Clinton a 92% chance of winning.

The election, held on 8 November, proved that the unthinkable could, indeed, happen. Despite losing the popular vote to Clinton by three million, Trump picked up almost all the battleground states: Florida, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin (Clinton held Virginia). States that were rumoured some months earlier to be in contention, including Arizona where a substantial Latino population was thought to be mobilising against Trump, remained solidly Republican.

The victories of both the Leave campaign in the British referendum on EU membership and Donald Trump in the US presidential election stunned many experts, pundits and political commentators. Both results seemed to highlight volatility in the British and US electorates that had been long speculated about, but which now finally found tangible form, as democratic facts.

Most of the contributors to this volume wrote their chapters before these two political earthquakes turned many of our assumptions about what the citizenries of our respective countries are thinking on their heads. As this book goes into production, in the spring of 2017, we are troubled by a suspicion that, already, global events risk eclipsing the intellectual concerns about which our authors have written so eloquently here. Brexit and Trump have now become synonymous with instability and uncertainty. Politics, in both countries, has been anything but normal ever since.

After 100 days in the White House, it is clear that President Trump has been keen to conduct himself much as he did as a candidate, riding the crest of a nativist-populist tide and railing against various kinds of elites, in Washington DC, the mainstream media and in the universities. Those concerned about the future of science policy, including the funding of research and teaching in both the social and

natural sciences, are right to be worried. Trump has threatened to cut funding to the National Science Foundation and even abolish the National Endowment for the Humanities. A long-time sceptic of human-induced climate change, he has described global warming as a 'hoax' perpetuated by the Chinese. In a provocative move, Trump appointed Scott Pruitt administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Pruitt, a lawyer from Oklahoma, is on record as having rejected the scientific consensus on climate change. His appointment has been destabilising to the EPA as an institution and has raised questions about the future of climate science under Donald Trump. It also generated anxiety amongst environmentalists, activists and policymakers keen to see the USA uphold its international obligations and continue to demonstrate leadership in reducing the global economy's dependence on burning fossil fuels, fears that were confirmed on 1 June 2017 when President Trump announced the US would quit the Paris climate accord. On 6 March 2017, one friend on Facebook shared with me an anonymous message from a friend of his who works at the EPA:

[Yeah] it's as bad as you are hearing: The entire agency is under lockdown, the website, facebook, twitter, you name it is static and can't be updated. All reports, findings, permits and studies are frozen and not to be released. No presentations or meetings with outside groups are to be scheduled. Any Press contacting us are to be directed to the Press Office which is also silenced and will give no response. All grants and contracts are frozen from the contractors working on Superfund sites to grad school students working on their thesis. We are still doing our work, writing reports, doing cancer modeling for pesticides hoping that this is temporary and we will be able to serve the public soon. But many of us are worried about an ideologically-fueled purging and if you use any federal data I advise you gather what you can now. We have been told the website is being reworked to reflect the new administration's policy. ... [You] all pay for the government and you should know what's going on. I am posting this as a fellow citizen and not in any sort of official capacity.

On their own, Trump's intentions vis-à-vis climate science would raise enough questions. For advocates of science who believe the latter thrives best in conditions of 'openness' – one of this book's central themes – there have also been other causes for concern.

One particular worry is that Republican lawmakers might use principles of transparency and reproducibility, which are fundamental to advancing the scientific method, to ‘weaponise’ science against itself, using data generated from poor-quality studies to undermine scientific credibility and consensus with a view to discrediting and defunding science programmes not to their ideological liking (see Yong, 2017). Another concern has arisen in response to calls during the early days of the Trump administration to close the border to citizens from a handful of Muslim-majority nations in the Middle East and North Africa. The White House has cited concerns about national security in its justification for promoting this policy, which was articulated alongside further calls to build a wall along the US–Mexico border and deport millions of undocumented migrants living in the country. While the so-called ‘Muslim ban’ has been challenged successfully in the courts, the cumulative impact of both policy proposals has been to weaken the United States’ claim to be a country welcoming to immigrants and refugees. Many supporters of science worry this will discourage members of the international scientific community from collaborating with colleagues based at US institutions. Could the apparent hostility of the Trump administration towards Latino and Muslim migrants fuel a more negative impression that the USA is no longer ‘open’ to those seeking opportunities for collaboration, employment or study in the United States?

Similar anxieties have animated debates about the future of science and higher education in the United Kingdom following Brexit. For now, it would seem that British scholars and scientists have much to lose when the country departs the European Union. If the UK Government embraces what has been coined a ‘hard’ Brexit, resulting in membership of the European single market being sacrificed in favour of uncompromising controls over borders and immigration, there is a risk that UK science will be denied opportunities to access EU research funding, participate in wider exchanges such as the ERASMUS scheme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), or even attract well-qualified undergraduate or postgraduate students from EU member states. British-based researchers who are not citizens of the UK but are EU nationals worry about their future beyond the conclusion of Article 50 negotiations. Anecdotal evidence

suggests there has already been a negative impact on prospective collaborations between UK- and EU-based research institutions, even though Britain remains a EU member state until at least 2019 and can access European research funds during that time. Whether or not British researchers find clear answers to their many questions following the snap general election Prime Minister Theresa May called for June 2017 remains to be seen.

The uncertainties science now faces, in both the UK and the USA, underscore the importance of the issues explored in the chapters that follow. One hope of this volume is to stimulate a conversation about the relationship between science, publics and openness and it would seem, in what we might characterise as politically ‘monstrous’ times, the need for such a conversation has now become especially urgent. How might we, as scholars and supporters of funding for scientific research and teaching, respond in this moment of ‘crisis’ for the disciplines we hold dear?

There are examples from which, I would suggest, we can draw inspiration. On 22 April 2017, thousands of supporters of science marched in the United States, the UK, indeed hundreds of cities worldwide. The so-called ‘March for Science’ attracted considerable media attention. Such initiatives help raise awareness of the issues facing the science community as a result of the policy uncertainties that Brexit and Trump’s election have unleashed.

I also take inspiration from my research subjects in Kansas. Since 2008, I have been visiting the state regularly, conducting ethnographic fieldwork on grassroots Republican Party politics (see Smith, 2013, 2015, forthcoming). My particular interest has been this: how do political moderates seek to empower themselves in the face of right-wing extremism and religious conservatism?

Kansas was the perfect field site in which to explore this question. It has been on the front line of the United States’ culture wars for the last three decades. Infamously, in 2005, the State Board of Education held a series of hearings on evolutionary theory, with a view to making the case for the teaching of intelligent design in the high-school science curriculum. At the time, evangelical Christians who believed in young-earth creationism had captured the Kansas Board of Education. The hearings attracted media interest from around the globe before

moderate Kansans mobilised and overturned the creationist majority on the State Board of Education in 2006.

I began this research at a time when US satirists, cultural commentators and politicians relished asking the rhetorical question that Thomas Frank (2004) popularised when he asked *What's the Matter with Kansas?* I commenced this study before the Tea Party movement came along, before the election of the socially conservative Sam Brownback as governor of Kansas, before far-right Republicans seized control of the state legislature and introduced destructive tax cuts that continue to imperil a wide range of government services, including public education. And I began this research before Donald Trump helped unify and give voice nationally to an angry nativist constituency.

But the question I sought to find answers to, in the United States' heartland, now seems more vital than ever. If Kansas has been ahead of the curve as far as US debates about the interface between science and democracy are concerned, this is where I find hope. Because on the day Donald Trump was elected president, moderate Kansans quietly turned up at their polling booths and elected a string of moderate Republicans and Democrats to the state legislature in what some are beginning to understand was an important rejection of the far-right economic and social policies that Trump appears keen to continue championing nationally. Now, with a moderate majority in Topeka, Republican and Democratic Party legislators, working together, are trying to fix the damage wrought on the state's finances after almost six years of a reckless politics. More than anything, this gives me hope – for science, for expertise, for publics that value education, for the renewal of a measured and moderate politics on both sides of the Atlantic.

If it can happen in Kansas, it can happen anywhere.¹

This coda was written at the beginning of 2017.

¹ National and international media organisations extensively covered both the UK referendum on EU membership and the election of Donald Trump as US president. My primary sources here are the BBC, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*.

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