

Civic Sociology

# Writing Justice/Performing Injustice: Reflections on Research, Publicity, and the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair

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This article discusses issues of public communication. It does so in terms of the ethics of verbatim theatre and public sociology. The issues raised are exemplified through the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair, which has been subject to extensive media reporting and public inquiries of various kinds as well as legal processes. In that sense, there have been various "courts of public opinion" where the affair has been "staged." In this article, it is understood as an injustice visited upon a community of British Muslims and the teachers and governors responsible for their schools, an injustice that was largely a consequence of provocative media reporting and peremptory government action. The article addresses the role of verbatim theatre in staging the injustice for public reflection and the role of public sociology as a project of writing for justice.

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, we consider the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair, a supposed "plot" to "Islamicise" schools in Birmingham. The article is based on academic research into the affair reported in Holmwood and O'Toole (2017) and collaboration between Holmwood and Monks and Woodhead, coauthors of *Trojan Horse*, a play about the affair that premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2018 (see declaration of interest at the end of this paper). Here, we reflect on the experience of "staging" the injustice visited on teachers and governors accused of the plot and the "pathologising" of the local community served by the schools.

Our approach to the affair depends upon our understanding of social research and theatre as activities of the public sphere, which McCarthy usefully describes as "a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest . . . [come to be] . . . institutionally guaranteed" (1989, xi). What is significant about this definition is that it identifies processes of opinion formation separately from mechanisms of political representation through institutions of the state. At the same time, it situates these processes between political representation and the other activities of members of society expressed through private associations, including the market exchanges of capitalism. The public sphere, then, is distinct from both the market and the state, although it is affected by each of them.

The public sphere is subject to regulation—for example, with regard to the protections of free speech (including restrictions on hate speech). Most recently, since 2015 institutions of the public sphere have been charged with safeguarding duties under the Prevent strategy for countering extremism. Roaa Ali (2018), for example, has written of the constraints placed upon Muslim artistic and cultural ex-

pression in terms of their lack of representation in arts organisations, direct censorship, and self-censorship in the context of the National Youth Theatre's cancellation of the play *Homegrown*, by Omar Al-Khairy. The reasons cited derived from the Prevent requirement introduced in the wake of the Trojan Horse affair to "safeguard" young people from risks of radicalisation. Because of arguments about "community outreach," arts organisations have also come under pressure to serve government agendas for promoting fundamental British values. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre, for example, believed itself unable to book the *Trojan Horse* play because it had commissioned theatre workshops for schools as part of the Prevent agenda.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair is both the consequence of a changing public discourse about "failed multiculturalism" (Cameron 2011) and its primary example (Casey 2016), justifying subsequent policy interventions with serious consequences for both education and the role of theatre.

### THE "PLOT"

In early 2014, the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair—a supposed "plot to Islamicise schools"—hit the headlines in the UK media. In response, in March 2014, twenty-one schools were submitted to special Ofsted inspections, with fourteen schools subsequently subject to further investigation by Ian Kershaw for Birmingham City Council (Kershaw Report 2014) and by Peter Clarke (former head of counterterrorism at the Metropolitan Police) for the Department for Education (Clarke Report 2014) covering a time period of allegations from 1996 to 2014. The Education Funding Agency (EFA) also inspected four schools: three associated with Park View Education Trust (PVET)—Park View Academy, Golden Hillock, and Nansen—and one other school, Old-

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1 Email from Birmingham Rep to LUNG Theatre. The commission is reported by Emma McKinney (2014). The play, *Tapestry*, predated the Trojan Horse affair by some five years (Winston and Strand 2013), but current performances are subject to the new Prevent requirements with regard to safeguarding and the reporting of behaviour or speech perceived to be a sign of vulnerability.

know, which had close connections with it. It recommended that the funding contracts be withdrawn. One of the inspectors from the EFA visits was seconded as education adviser to the Clarke Report and drafted sections of it.

All of this took place under intense media scrutiny with allegations against parents, teachers, and the governors at the schools. Claims of bullying and inappropriate behaviour—for example, the distribution of class handouts stating that, under Islamic teaching, wives had to consent to sex with their husbands, the recording of a jihadi video in a school media centre, and the presentation of religious views during science lessons—were widely reported without any challenge. The Clarke Report listed twenty such “serious incidents” at PVET, while commenting laconically that “it is only fair to point out that the Trust disputed most, if not all, of the allegations” (Clarke Report 2014, 52).

The play stages the impact of these events and allegations at one school—Park View Academy—from the Ofsted and EFA visits through to the consequences of the Clarke Report.<sup>2</sup> The latter recommended that the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) should bring professional misconduct cases against those involved in the “plot.”

Richard Kerbaj and Sian Griffiths (2015) reported in the *Times* that more than one hundred “Islamist” teachers were involved and that the NCTL was already considering thirty separate cases. In the event, just four cases were brought involving twelve teachers at PVET and Oldknow school. The cases against the teachers at PVET—the core of the “plot,” according to the Clarke Report—began in October 2015. Significantly, the charges against the teachers were not of “extremism” but of “undue religious influence.” Nor were there any charges made of financial impropriety and bullying, except for bullying in one case where the charges were dropped in the course of the hearing (Holmwood and O’Toole 2017).

The cases dragged on for nearly two years but were discontinued when the case against the senior leaders at PVET collapsed in May 2017 (NCTL 2017). This was a consequence of serious impropriety by the NCTL, including, *inter alia*, the revelation that witness statements for the prosecution had been drawn up in the light of statements given to the Clarke Report. This was something that had been vigorously denied by lawyers for NCTL, and it meant that those, and any unused statements from the Clarke Report in the possession of the NCTL legal team, should have been subject to disclosure to the defence. This included testimony of witnesses, including officials from Birmingham City Council and the Department for Education (DfE), which substantiated defence claims and had not been reported by Clarke. The credibility of the testimony from the member of the EFA inspection visit to PVET who went on to serve as education adviser to the Clarke inquiry was also questioned. Her testimony is featured in the play.

Government officials and policy advisers, as well as jour-

nalists previously involved in the case, rushed to announce that the cases had collapsed on a “technicality.” For example, the co-head of the security and extremism unit at Policy Exchange (the conservative think tank that had advised Michael Gove’s schools programme), Hannah Stuart, and its head of education, John David Blake, proposed that “non-disclosure of anonymous witness statements from the Clarke inquiry was described as an ‘abuse of process’, and that is deeply unfortunate, but this falls short of an exoneration. The decision to discontinue disciplinary proceedings was based on procedural grounds—not on a shortage of evidence” (Stuart and Blake 2017). No mention was made of the fact that allegations of extremism had not been any part of the charges against teachers. Jaimie Martin, former special adviser at the DfE, wrote that “it is important to note as [the teachers] were not tried for the charges, they were therefore not cleared of them” and that “people who downplay the seriousness of Trojan Horse, claiming those involved exhibited ‘mainstream’ Islamic views, are guilty not only of stunning naivety, but of a dangerous error” (Martin 2017).

This negative reporting extended to accusations of collusion in extremism against the authors of this article by virtue of our presentation of a different account of the affair. For example, a meeting in Birmingham in November 2017 to discuss the implications of the collapse of the cases against the senior teachers was attacked by Nick Timothy (2017) in the *Telegraph*: “the invite seemed innocuous. Tomorrow evening, at a community centre in Birmingham, parents, teachers and others would gather to discuss the future of schools in Britain’s second city. . . . It was instead a shocking attempt to deny [the Trojan Horse scandal of 2014](#) in plain sight of the public and authorities. . . . When *The Daily Telegraph* discovered this, and contacted the owners of the venue, they rightly cancelled it. It may still be held elsewhere. But even if it is not, that is unlikely to be the end of this plot.” Equally, LUNG’s play *Trojan Horse* was subject to similar attacks by Nick Timothy (2018), along with the claim that it was “a fiction to say that there was no plot by Islamist hardliners to take over state schools” and that “left-wing media types risk playing the Trojan Horse extremists’ game.” Timothy had not seen the play. Andrew Gilligan (2018) sought to rectify this “oversight” in his own review, which also argued that “a new play distorts the truth of how Muslim hardliners took over schools in Birmingham.”<sup>3</sup>

In part, this response was because of the way the affair had been used to justify changes to public policies. Most importantly, these involved the government’s Prevent agenda for countering terrorism (first set out in 2007, but with important changes in 2014–15) including its articulation with education. For example, schools’ duty to promote “fundamental British values” was proclaimed (Department of Education 2014), and the affair was used the following year as the primary example of “extremist entryism” that

2 Park View was a school with 98.9 percent of its pupils of Muslim heritage. It had been in special measures in 1996, and by 2012 it was in the top 14 percent of all schools in England for academic achievement. This achievement was despite the fact that 72.7 percent of its pupils were on free school meals and just 7.5 percent had English as a first language. It also had a higher than average percentage of pupils with special needs. The Department for Education approached it to form a multi-academy trust and incorporate other, “failing” schools. These facts were not reported by Clarke or by journalists. See Holmwood and O’Toole (2017).

3 Gilligan had seen the play but cited his own interviews that confirmed the “distortions” of the play, specifically an interview that described a class handout produced by a teacher that said that wives were required to consent to sex with their husbands (the handout is also referred to in the Clarke Report). However, it was accepted in the NCTL hearing that the “handout” was, in fact, a printout from the internet passed around by boys in a class and that, when brought to the attention of senior teachers, a special assembly was convened in which it was argued that this was contrary to both British law and Islamic teaching.

would be guarded against by a new [Counter Extremism Strategy](#) (Home Office 2015) to be applied to public services including higher education (Scott-Baumann 2018). The Conservative Party Election Manifesto of 2017 also proposed a new Counter Extremism Commission and gave notice of the intention to use equalities legislation—specifically the Equality Act of 2010—to combat extremism (2017, 55). In this context, there has been a high-level commitment to maintain the original narrative of the affair and, as we shall see, this coincides with wider interests associated with the beneficiaries of the DfE’s academies programme.

This has led us to see similarities with the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, where false claims about Liverpool football supporters—drunkenness, pilfering from dying victims, attacks on police—were put forward by the authorities and recycled by the media as part of an attempted cover-up of police failings in crowd management that had led to the deaths of ninety-six fans (Scruton 1999). In the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair, teachers lost their livelihoods and, together with school governors, had their reputations and motivations impugned. At the same time, their local communities were represented as ethnic minority “monocultures” at odds with mainstream British values. They became examples to be pointed to in the context of growing concerns about social integration (see, for example, Casey 2016). In the case of the Hillsborough disaster, it was not until a film publicising the alternative narrative was shown in 1996 that the narrative began to change; the judgement of a new independent panel in 2012 was accepted by the government, leading to a new police investigation and inquests in 2016 that changed the official verdicts from accidental deaths to unlawful killings.<sup>4</sup> The play *Trojan Horse* represents a similar attempt to engage the public with an injustice produced in their name.

The play ends with two events separated in time encapsulating the damage done. Farah, a pupil at Park View, receives the poor verdict on her GCSE examinations taken during the summer term of 2015, having been caught up in the furore over the Trojan Horse affair and subsequent changes at the school in the previous year;<sup>5</sup> two years later, in May 2017, teacher Rashid anticipates the verdict in his misconduct case, to learn that the case has collapsed without a judgement being reached except in the media. Indeed, the effect of the collapse was specifically to render the teachers silenced. The press turned up at the start of the hearings and reported the opening statements of the barrister leading for the NCTL and the evidence he proposed to adduce. Because the hearing was spread out over thirty months, journalists were not there to hear the cross-examinations. They would have intended to be in court to hear the closing statements of prosecution and defence, which they would then have interpreted in the light of the verdict. But the cases collapsed before those statements were delivered.

As Rashid says at the end of the play:

*My case collapsed. When I found out, it didn't feel like a victory to be honest with you. The transcripts of the*

*trial were never published. My defence has never been heard. That's it. I've been branded . . . I am the Trojan Horse.* (Monks and Woodhead 2019)

## A CONSTRAINED PUBLIC SPHERE?

Institutions within the public sphere, whether media organisations, universities, or theatres, are subject to commercial imperatives. At the very least, they need to secure revenues to maintain their activities. The market context has changed for journalism as a consequence of the impact of the internet upon the business models for print media, but there are changes, too, for universities with their increased marketisation and the requirement that publicly funded research should show “impact” (Holmwood 2011). A similar situation exists for theatre and the arts that need to secure funding in a context of budget cuts and where funders apply impact criteria to their funding. Indeed, Bartlett (2011, 173) recounts how the availability of funding for arts initiatives such as her own verbatim play, *Not in My Name*, through Prevent (and in partnership with the counterterrorism unit of Lancashire Constabulary) coincided with announcements of cutbacks and redundancies at the Arts Council.

As Ali (2018) argues, the Arts Council’s expressed concern for “diversity” also has to contend with a wider discourse of risk deriving from the Prevent duties, which constrains how it meets that ambition. Bartlett, for example, developed her verbatim play in an earlier iteration of the Prevent strategy before, in the wake of the Trojan Horse affair, its focus shifted from violent to nonviolent extremism and introduced a duty to report behaviour and attitudes that might indicate a risk of radicalisation. Bartlett describes that both the interviews undertaken in researching the play and responses to the play in the interactive post-performance workshops include some issues that she found worrying (2011, 180, 183, 187).<sup>6</sup> Under current Prevent duties, she would have a duty to report her participants, as, indeed, would academic researchers. More profoundly, the very staging of the play (and the interactive workshops associated with it) produces the risk of self-incrimination by participants. We shall return to the ethical issues raised, but even where the issue was framed as violent rather than non-violent extremism, Bartlett felt constrained to “steer” the workshop conversations. Thus, she comments that they are “inherently ‘stage-managed’ to deny the inclusion of some possible minority opinion, thus constituting a further editorial half truth beyond the verbatim construction of the play itself . . . both the facilitator’s questioning and the information provided by the actor playing Shahid [the central character, who perpetrates a terrorist outrage at the start of the play] is focused to enable any responsive deviation that may conflict with the messages we have chosen to endorse . . . to be rapidly dismissed” (2011, 190).<sup>7</sup>

The dominant mode of the regulation of activities of organisations in the public sphere in liberal democracies is self-regulation through “professional ethics.” These ethi-

4 For a timeline of the Hillsborough disaster, see Conn (2017).

5 Farah gets Ds for all her GCSEs, with the exception of Urdu, for which she receives an A\*. The school’s overall performance falls dramatically, from 76 percent passes at A–C (including maths and English) to 42 percent, a decline from which it has yet to recover.

6 For example, Bartlett comments, “inevitably, given the theme of my research, I encountered specific perspectives that were offensive, abusive and sometimes dangerously provocative. Many of these voices are nevertheless represented within *Not in My Name*, but included specifically to devalidate through structural opposition rather than endorse them” (2011, 183).

7 Significantly, Bartlett refers to Augustus Boal’s “theatre of the oppressed” (1998) and its staged “forums” as an inspiration, while using performance to sustain legislative politics rather than to remake it.

cal frameworks are designed to ensure integrity in “reporting”—variously understood in terms of “balance,” “objectivity,” “weighing of evidence,” and the like—and to provide the protection of those who are subject to reporting from unnecessary harms, qualified only by the public interest. Of course, these ideas are not uncontested. As far as the press in the United Kingdom is concerned, disquiet over self-regulation was heightened following the phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Report (2012). There have also been serious reservations raised about verbatim theatre, not least because it is frequently addressed to a perceived injustice, or to give “voice” to a marginalised group, which means that dramatic expression can distort the very truth that its documentary methods purport to reveal (Fisher 2011). However, although verbatim theatre is a form of theatre that is usually associated with challenging power (Boal 1998) or facilitating different voices (Paget 1987), it is now also used to deliver government messages under Prevent, as in the case of *Not in My Name*.

These are issues that have become more pertinent in the light of claims about “post-truth” and “fake news,” which have challenged established media and claims for expertise alike. The latter is increasingly represented as a form of “monopolistic” appropriation at odds with the democratisation of knowledge otherwise to be welcomed, as is argued by Fuller (2018). Fuller, however, misunderstands the idea of the professions and their social significance as standardly argued within sociology. For example, both T. H. Marshall (1939) and Talcott Parsons (1966) associate the rise of the professions with the development of the modern citizenship complex and, most importantly, link the phenomenon to democracy and social rights. The university as an institution had come to be responsible for what Parsons calls the “cognitive complex” within modern societies—that is, the knowledge associated with the activities of an emergent knowledge society (and economy) and its (various) “publics.” However, that knowledge is at the service of the values that underpin the citizenship complex of the public sphere. While “professions” are the “outward” face of the knowledge society and its demand for specialized expertise, the university is increasingly the guarantor of the knowledge base of that expertise and its development through research. In this analysis, the professions represent not a self-interest derived from their monopoly of warranted knowledge but a public interest, organised under democratic values of a society of equals (see Holmwood 2014 for further discussion).

Fuller (2018), for his part, endorses the idea of post-truth as the logical conclusion of the arguments of sociology about the nature of knowledge as power. For him, there is little to be gained from lamenting the situation and everything to be gained from joining the game. Post-truth, for Fuller, is nothing less than a consequence of the “democratisation” of knowledge, especially in the context of social media and the internet, where information and counterinformation is readily available. In fact, if everyone is an expert, no one can be, and knowledge claims become reduced to expressions of opinions and “interests”—for example, those of “elites” or of “ordinary people.”

His argument is weak precisely insofar as he has no concept of democracy and, instead, operates with a neoliberal conception of a market for ideas. We can understand the conflation by going back to an older sociological under-

standing of democracy in terms of “publics” and discursive processes of decision-making. The wider project of neoliberalism is to displace publics with markets, and thus the displacement of democracy itself by the market. The alternative view of expertise that we shall put forward is one that understands it as “unsettling” of settled judgements and facilitating public debate. In that context, judgement is not assigned to experts, as Walter Lippmann (1925) famously argued, but remains the responsibility of publics and their legitimately constituted bodies (which are themselves the legitimate object of criticism).

## COURTS OF OPINION

Of course, the public sphere *is* a sphere of interests and a space in which government, opposition groups, and voluntary associations make claims and seek influence. To some degree, then, sociological knowledge can be understood as facilitating that debate, just as journalism seeks to report the claims of different groups and organisations and their justifications (or otherwise). This immediately raises a specific problem of the relation between “objectivity” and “advocacy,” a topic that was addressed in Howard Becker’s classic article “Whose Side Are We On?” (1967). As Hammersley (2001) has argued, Becker is frequently misrepresented as claiming that sociology should be partisan, or that sociologists have an obligation to take sides, but this is a serious misunderstanding of his purpose. Becker is neutral on such matters, while observing that most sociologists are liberal and oriented to social justice, notwithstanding that others are conservative or more radical in their political orientation. His purpose is to show that what is at issue is not the subjective views of sociologists—even their intersubjective views (that is, views taken to define the ethos of the discipline)—but *how their research is perceived*. In other words, protestations of “objectivity” and professional ethics may not cut any mustard in the real world.

Becker makes this argument from a simple observation: that the actors and activities that sociologists are interested in are bound up in relations of power and are already organised in terms of meanings and claims for authority. Sociologists, he argues, are frequently interested in the behaviours of those in subaltern positions and, in consequence, will be looked at with suspicion by those in superordinate positions. There is, he says, a preexisting “hierarchy of credibility,” one where superordinates represent their own understandings as legitimate. In this context, they present the mere representation of other understandings as a partisan questioning of their own legitimacy. In contrast, the “sociologist who favors officialdom will be spared the accusation of bias” (Becker 1967, 245).

Becker’s purpose is neither to endorse partisanship nor to denounce it, but simply to observe that sociologists must conduct their craft within such hierarchies of credibility.<sup>8</sup> In line with the “dramaturgical” analogy that motivates his general approach, Becker suggests that these “are seen by society as morality plays and we shall find ourselves, willy-nilly, taking part in those plays on one side or the other” (1967, 245). We suggest that this is a helpful way of thinking about reporting, sociological or otherwise (including that of verbatim theatre). Its role is not to adjudicate contrary accounts but to provide a way of facilitating judgement in contested circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> Galtung and Ruge (1965) made similar arguments for news reporting.

Significantly, this is a role that accords with that of an expert witness to a court. The expert witness is appointed by one of the parties, but her or his duties are to the court—not to the appointing party—to provide an explication of complex matters for settlement by a panel, magistrates or jurors who are not expert in the matter at hand but are sanctioned to make judgement on them. In many ways, this corresponds to what Edmondson (1984, 6) has analysed as the “rhetorics” of sociological writing, involving the means that “aid one’s interlocutor to arrive at a convinced judgement of his or her own.” The devices may not be familiar, but the setting of the court involves the direct interrogation of statements, in contrast to the situation in which the audience is made up of colleagues where the devices are the accepted norms and conventions of the profession.

Indeed, the court can itself be understood as a theatre in which justice is staged (Scott 2016). A court performance is designed to reinforce its “authoritative” nature through its placing of the actors on different parts of the stage (the dock, the bench), their dress (indicative of authority and hierarchy), the formal politeness of its proceedings (specifically, and paradoxically, their lack of “drama”), and the trolleys of files of evidence, which are a conspicuous part of the proceedings and to which witnesses are pointed in their testimony. Rogers (2008), however, proposes that, while useful, the analogy between a court and a theatre breaks down just at that point where a judgement is entered against someone. Here the court is revealed to be grounded in “violence”—that very violence, for example, the legitimate monopoly of which, Weber argued, is exercised by the state in whose name the court acts.

This dimension of violence is absent in theatre, which is generally understood in terms of fictional representations that do not lead to decisive outcomes. In documentary theatre something different than the court performance is happening, even where transcripts of a court are part of the play’s construction. Verbatim theatre purports to represent the truth of the events it stages, but it has to do so through artifice. Indeed, verbatim theatre frequently draws attention to that artifice by elements of staging that indicate to the audience that what it is being shown is a consequence of reconstruction and editing (for example, as in the case of *Trojan Horse*, by an ensemble cast enacting different parts).

“Truth” in verbatim theatre would be a pale counterpart to imaginative theatre were it not for its relation to the court (or some equivalent, such as a formally constituted inquiry) and its decisions. It draws its force from an imputed failing in the decisions of the court, a failing that it understands to be an injustice. The audience is asked to be moved by the injustice and its consequences, but it is not asked to declare a judgement. The performance “reopens” that which is purported to be “closed” by decision of the court.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this constitutes one aspect of Boal’s (1998) claim for the legislative function of verbatim theatre.

In this way, we can see that calling the “truth” of the court into question would be sufficient to elicit the response by those invested in its judgement that what is at play is “bias” and “misrepresentation.” After all, from the perspective of the court, the “evidence” was plain and the judge-

ment settled. However, it would be difficult to understand this process of verbatim theatre except as contributing to a debate—to democracy in action—in contrast to the reinforcement of authority to stop the unsettling of what had been settled, albeit preemptively.

So far, what we have written is not uncomfortable from a social scientific perspective. We have implied that journalists in the affair reported from the “official” point of view, although we have not yet discussed why that should be. It is not that journalists should not report settled judgements as fact. The problem in the Trojan Horse affair was that they presented as factual that which was not settled (precisely because the court process was cut short without a proper judgement, and because the inquiries that provided the background were not subjected to scrutiny).

What has also been noticeable about the Trojan Horse affair, however, is that it has not been taken up by many of the NGOs and activist groups outside those representing Muslims. We can turn to Becker again for some insight. He makes a further distinction between “apolitical” and “political” situations, suggesting, paradoxically, that the issues of perceived “bias” are more fraught in the former than in the latter. This is because when something is defined as political, it has this status precisely because it can easily be represented in terms of “sides.” What constitutes balance is resolved by representing a publicly recognised difference.

This formulation, however, is not apt, as can be illustrated in the circumstances of the Trojan Horse affair. It is not simply that the “sides” do not have equal power or place in the hierarchy of credibility. Spivak (1988) famously posed the question “can the subaltern speak?,” but the issue is properly one of whether existing structures facilitate their being heard (Bhambra 2014). Bartlett (2011, 176), for example, cites Mladen Dolar’s (2006) ethics of “hearing voices” in her justification of the use of verbatim theatre. However, in describing her editorial decisions, she relies upon her “inner voice of reason” aligned with the legislative power, through which the voices heard in her play must be passed. Indeed, the representation of “sides” does not mean that others will be heard properly, and it poses the question of the structural capacity for listening (Back 2007). In this situation, the role of sociology, or theatre, as mediator, or as vehicle for marginalised voices, becomes at issue. This is especially the case when, as we have suggested, both the impact agenda for academic research and the use of theatre in schools to deliver government educational policies encourage alignment with the official view.

What if the subaltern does not seem to be on “our” side? The dominant “liberalism” of professional knowledge oriented to democratic values confronts a problem when the subordinate position is, from its own perspective, potentially understood as “illiberal” and framed as antidemocratic. In principle, the obligations that Becker sets out would remain, but now those who report sympathetically face a problem of credibility not just from the superordinate position being criticised, but also from within their own professional group, whose “secular liberalism” maintains a critical distance from those with conservative, or what are perceived as conservative, nonliberal, or religious values. *From*

9 In the case of *Trojan Horse*, for example, this was implicitly recognised in a later review by the *Telegraph’s* drama critic based, unlike that of Timothy, on a viewing of the play. Presenting the variety of views expressed in the play, Dominic Cavendish (2018) writes: “There are thousands more words besides those. Some of them will sway you in completely different directions—and send you off looking for more information. That’s valuable. As with the best education, we shouldn’t accept spoon-feeding, from whatever source. See it. Judge for yourselves.”

*the “official” government perspective, those involved in the Trojan Horse affair are the wrong sort of conservative; from a liberal perspective, the problem is that they are any sort of conservative.*

This situation has been reinforced by the government’s recent decision to utilise the Equality Act 2010 to interpret the duty to promote fundamental British values and the application of the Prevent agenda in schools (for discussion, see Holmwood and Scott-Baumann, forthcoming). The claims of egregious practices—gender segregation, homophobia, religious conservatism, albeit falsely alleged against the Trojan Horse schools in Birmingham—are set against a wider British commitment to equalities, equalities that are also central to sociological conceptions of justice. What is displaced, however, is the protection of religious belief as expressed in the Equality Act 2010 and in the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18 of the Social and Political Covenant, paragraph 4), which states that its signatories will have “respect for the liberty of parents . . . to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.” Indeed, in the wake of the Trojan Horse affair, Clayton et al. (2018) have argued against this understanding, proposing instead that children should have the right to protection (safeguarding) from the beliefs of their parents: “Current legislation,” they write, “is too permissive to parents and insufficiently attentive to children’s interests, in particular their interest in autonomy” (2018, 9).

As we have already argued, there was no basis to the claims of extremism made against teachers, nor was there any evidence that the school at the centre was failing its pupils in terms of their future capacities as citizens. Moreover, none of their activities was in breach of existing statutory requirements on schools. However, the argument is increasingly that there should be no compulsory religious education and collective worship in publicly funded schools. Notice that the argument arises as a consequence of ethnic minority and other-than-Christian heritage communities exercising their rights under current statutory requirements. Instead, the Trojan Horse affair becomes an example of the exercise of a lawful right that should not have existed. The fact that the Human Rights Act 1998, Article 7, establishes that there should be no punishment for acts where there is no law forbidding them becomes a “state of exception” (Agamben 2005), now endorsed by liberals—including social scientists—in their arguments against religion.

## A NEW POLITICS?

Our account so far has not addressed directly the changing social and political circumstances of the different forms of reporting. We have argued that there has been a dispersal of school governance into multiple discrete networked communities of practice (some charitable, some philanthropic, some for-profit organisations), alongside a centralisation of

responsibility under the DfE and its agencies. Here we will consider how that development has occurred across a number of areas and its consequences for the public sphere and reporting practices.

Ball and Junemann (2012) argue that “networked governance” involves not a “hollowing out” of the state as some, such as Rhodes (1994), have argued but a “rolling out” of new structures and technologies of governance (see also Holliday 2000). However, they are rather neglectful of the authoritarian implications of networked governance, in terms of the enhanced power and responsibility assigned to the centre and the relative weakness of the other agents in the network and of those who are cast outside it. The new networks are both fragile and separate from local responsibilities. Instead, they are networked directly with government. Moreover, the networks include—indeed, are dominated by—the beneficiaries of public funding (diverted from local authorities) and dependent on the goodwill of the DfE. At the same time, the agencies and programmes operated by the DfE now function on the basis of consultants drawn from the very network system under scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> For example, Ark Academy Trust took over two of the schools associated with the Trojan Horse affair, and its finance director, Amanda Spielman, replaced Michael Wilshaw as chief inspector of schools. The officials at the DfE responsible for the schools improvement programme were themselves employed as consultants with an interest in the maintenance of their contracts and not as civil servants operating under a public duty.<sup>11</sup>

If “hollowing out” of the state is the wrong description, then it has certainly been *privatised*, leading to the attenuation of a public voice except through the media. Indeed, the conjunction of networked governance and populism is not accidental. Democracy necessarily functions through populism once authorised public agencies of local accountability are transferred to private consultancies and independent agencies (see Boon, Salomonsen, and Verhoest 2019). Populism, in this sense, is not a reaction to a government that is out of touch with the people but is the mode in which government itself functions and how it uses the media. Indeed, in Becker’s terms, populism might be understood as laying claim to an inclusive credibility of the “people” where difference constitutes an alien expression within the body politic. David Cameron’s (2011) declaration that multiculturalism had failed was very precisely made in these terms. Scapegoating is how politics is conducted.

Politicians plant “fake” stories or “spin” them, and journalists faithfully report their “truth” rather than exposing the distortions. But, surely, the situation of social science and sociology is different from that of journalism? The view that they are different would neglect recent changes to higher education and its marketisation. Our institutions are now no less commercial than large media corporations. The currency of higher education is “reputation,” which can be represented in a rank order and converted into revenue.

10 It is significant that when Birmingham City Council initiated an inquiry into the Trojan Horse affair, it called upon not the director of education of another local authority but the chief executive of a multi-academy trust—Ian Kershaw of Northern Education Trust, then made up of around 20 schools equally divided between primary and secondary schools, compared with 437 schools then operating in Birmingham, and based in Newcastle, which has a below average (for England) proportion of ethnic minority pupils compared with Birmingham’s above average proportion. See Holmwood and O’Toole (2017, 170ff.).

11 Janet Downs (2015), for example, reports for the Local Schools Network that ninety-three “education specialist contractors” were selected by the DfE to support the academies programme, and advise regional school commissioners on sponsorship of underperforming schools to become part of multi-academy trusts. Many of these advisers have stakes within existing trusts. It replaced an earlier scheme of “academy brokers,” but nine of the new contractors were former brokers, one of whom represented thirty-seven of the new contractors. Another was Rob Briscoe Associates. The latter was the representative of the DfE in the development of PVET.

Moreover, we have been encouraged to think of our research in terms of its use by some “beneficiary”—the “impact agenda.” Our claim is to provide the evidence to facilitate policy, but under the strictures of co-produced knowledge with beneficiaries, our knowledge necessarily becomes *interest based*. As should be clear, this is different from the model of the “expert witness,” which is precisely to facilitate debate *in the context of interests*, while being advocate of no particular interest other than the representation of the evidence made available for public judgement.

## CONCLUSION

This article has addressed issues of reporting central to conceptions of public sociology and verbatim theatre. Burawoy (2005, 6) acknowledges a “scissors movement” where “over the last half century the political center of gravity of sociology has moved in a critical direction while the world it studies has moved in the opposite direction.” But the issue is not simply one of different public values, though, undoubtedly, the scissors movement that Burawoy describes facilitates populism and the critique of (sociological) expertise. It is more important, as we have suggested here, that the sociological conditions of functioning democratic decision-making have been weakened and that the agencies that facilitate this decision-making—the press, academic research—have been bent to instrumental ends.

Burawoy (2005, 18) also suggests that instrumental knowledge has come to prevail over the “reflexive knowledge” associated with critical approaches. He calls for a greater accountability to “publics” rather than “peers” and also for a recognition that professional and public sociologies share much in common.<sup>12</sup> Here we have suggested that the problem, in part, is that there is no straightforward alignment of critical sociology and the values of “subaltern groups.” As the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair shows, one of the difficulties has been getting any acknowledgement of the significance of the case precisely because of the liberal assumptions that are shared by critical and professional sociologies. In this context, verbatim theatre has been a valuable way of reaching audiences that are not simply those that are already aligned with the presumed lessons to be learned—for example, about Islamophobia.

In this article we have drawn on the role of the expert witness to illustrate a form of sociological humility, which places expertise at the service of those who are called to make a judgement, rather than supplanting that role by declaring the answer. In a similar way, verbatim theatre unsettles what was previously settled, but it must do so by mak-

ing its characters believable in their motivations; otherwise, it becomes “didactic” rather than “dialogic.” But there are always lives at stake. If knowledge is power, then it cannot also be a game, as Fuller (2018) has suggested. Or, if it is, it is one in which the losers may suffer not only a failure to realise their interests but also a loss of their rights and, in the context of populism, the calumny of public opinion. In our present times, we are in urgent need of social research that will rectify injustice and a theatre that will break through one-dimensional representations of public events.<sup>[13]</sup>

As Farah, a pupil at Park View, says toward the end of the play:

*British Values are now part of the curriculum for my little brothers at Nansen Primary. British Values are Islamic values. They're not something that's new to us because there's a label or a policy. To suddenly name it “British values” as though Britishness is something I have to learn, something I have to become, rather than something I already am. I was born in Alum Rock, I've lived in Birmingham all my life. What about me is not British? (Monks and Woodhead 2019)*

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors were themselves actively involved in the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair. John Holmwood was an expert witness for the defence in court cases brought by the National College of Teaching and Leadership, specifically the case involving senior leaders at Park View Educational Trust. Helen Monks and Matt Woodhead are writer/directors at LUNG Theatre, a verbatim theatre company associated with Leeds Playhouse. Between 2014 and 2017, they conducted two hundred hours of interviews with pupils, parents, teachers, governors, and education officials in Birmingham and at the DfE. *Trojan Horse* was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2018, where it won the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award (among other awards) but failed to get bookings for a subsequent run at other venues. (Following the Amnesty award, it was booked for a tour of major venues in October and November 2019 and in February 2020.) The authors of this article also had access to all official reports (redacted in some cases to protect witnesses) and court documents, including transcripts, in the public domain. This was information available to journalists reporting on the Trojan Horse affair, many of whom purported to have interviewed key players and local “informants.”

<sup>12</sup> Burawoy aligns both professional and policy sociologies with “instrumental knowledge” and critical and public sociologies with “reflexive knowledge.”

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