Democracy in a de-civilising age. Where declining shame and growing narcissism enables 'post truth' to flourish.

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Abstract

In this paper, we articulate an argument that suggests we need to look to broad, yet often quite subtle, societal and cultural changes, in order to better understand post-truth politics. We argue that democracy, ontologically premised on the atomized individual as the legitimate social agent, (Hay 2007) is itself being destabilised. This disruption is due in part to a shift in our conception of 'self' that is both corroding the core pillars of our civilising process and altering the nature of our engagement with democratic politics. The historic processes of a civilising culture are outlined in order to argue that the power of our neoliberal consumer culture has generated a 'decivilising turn', characterized by the rise of shame thresholds and narcissistic personalities. We then illustrate how these cultural changes produce a climate welcoming of 'Post-truth', linking this most specifically to the contemporary political landscape. Civic life resides most acutely in the customs and conventions upheld through the practice of our public dealings with others. The more entrenched, the less easily it can be disrupted by maverick acts and demagogues' deeds. However, when those in positions of high office show little self-restraint, and sufficient numbers of the populous don't care, the norms democracy depends on are vulnerable to 'charlatan' leaders and populist causes. Here, we offer a picture of democracy in a *'decivilising'* age where shameless personal truth is privileged.

Please note that the start of the introduction contains words that some readers may find offensive.

Democracy in a de-civilising age: the rise of shameless personal truths.

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Introduction

Shit, piss, fart, puke, burp, excrete, sick, puss, defecate, snort, belch, spew, grunt, crap, snot, dump, trump. Repeat until you come to your senses!

This could be part of an installation displayed in the many museums of contemporary art–it is not. It is also not an example of post-truth; it has simply been made up to illustrate a list of bodily functions that have been increasingly hidden away, controlled and soothed through euphemism - all illustrative of a 'civilising process' witnessed since Medieval times (Elias 1939) - a process driven by value being placed on human sociality and a defining of self *through* shared norms shaping our interactional relations with others. Indeed, modern forms of democracy can be considered, in part, the result of us placing greater trust in the collective will, an acknowledgement that our own future is intricately tied to that of our fellow citizen.

In this paper we outline an argument that shows how the 'civilising process' articulated by Elias (1939) and developed most notably by Goffman (1959), Sennett (2000, 2007, 2011) and Kilminster (2007, 2008) has shaped the character of our politics. By tracing changes in standards of generally acceptable behaviours and feelings over many generations the civilising thesis helps us understand how power relations generate habits that become desirable, indeed necessary, in order to 'succeed' and how these routine behaviours and affective states impact individuals in ways that eventually become internalised. These things coalesce to bring a more, or less, civilised culture. Given the political sphere is located within the broader societal spheres alluded to above, and that democratic politics is rooted in discourse ethics that is constructed from a civilising process (Linklater 2005), this process can be considered as social forces trying to 'solve the problem of how persons can satisfy needs without destroying, frustrating, demeaning or in other ways harming each other' (p141). Thus, we take a theoretical step sideways in order to make a contribution to better appreciating 'Politics in a post-truth world'. We argue that democracy, ontologically premised on the atomized individual as the legitimate social agent (Hay 2007), is itself being destabilised. This disruption is due, in part, to a shift in our conception of 'self' that is both corroding the core pillars of our civilising process and altering the nature of our engagement with democratic politics. Further disruptive forces are located in rising thresholds of shame, which, as Tarnopolsky (2004) reminds us, is critical in the construction of one's identity.

The argument is presented in the following way. We outline the essence of the civilising process as a concept before positing an erosion of some aspects that create an environment where 'post truth' can flourish. We then specifically suggest contemporary culture is contextualised by rising shame thresholds and the narcissistic character of consumerist citizens being ever more apparent. The implications for the political landscape where personal truths are privileged are then considered before offering some concluding thoughts in relation to the challenges faced by democracy in such *'decivilising times'*.

Civilising cultures

The essence of Elias's seminal work on the Civilising Process (1939) traces changes in standards of generally acceptable behaviours and feeling over many generations. At its heart, it looks at how power relations generate habits that become desirable and how these subsequent routine behaviours and affective states become so powerful as to eventually become internalized and taken-for-granted. These things coalesce to bring a more, or less, civilised culture. Lengthening chains of interdependence increase such self-restraint (Gornicka et al 2015). Transferred to the contemporary political arena those dominant groups have historically demonstrated what is tolerable to others. A foundational element of this thesis is the problematising of all conceptions of self which privilege the individualistic human self-image and personal agency (Lasch 1978, Elliot 1997, Nixon et all 2016) . Instead, Elias placed emphasis on the interdependencies and inter-generational nature of knowing who we are; in large part the self is thus considered a result of what came before and what we emerge into - to be human is to be social. Building on this, Goffman's work (1959, 1974), articulating a performative-self, contains at its core an interactional perspective where the individual's identity work is located in their social interactions and encounters with others. We take on specific roles, or what Goffman calls 'typifications' in order to fit into the situations we face. Flowing from this is the need to deny self-autarky, and to overtly recognise that one's own contribution to any argument/achievement is always contingent and dependent on others. Such a stance appears at odds with much contemporary political rhetoric, full as it is, of personalisation, leadership fetish, private concerns and individualised truths.

To be civic is to be restrained, controlled, well-ordered and therefore relatively predictable in one's response to others. The range of options considered to be viable in any given context are self-limited, with the un-civic possibilities consistently considered 'beyond the pale' as to eventfully obscure them so that they start to vanish; categorised as historic ways of being. Such actions included cruelty and humiliation towards others. Civicness is then the codifying and sharing of a sense of decency and manners, what Wouters (1986 p3) referred to as 'a highly controlled decontrolling of emotional controls'. Civility generates strong desires to avoid feeling shame - negative self-evaluation linked to reflecting on a prior or anticipated behaviour (Tangney and Dearing 2002).

By tracing the historic processes of how we become (are becoming) highly developed in self-control and responding accordingly to sensibilities for others, Elias (1939) is crucially showing how we bring to the fore our appreciation of where we have come from. Thus, awareness of a civilising process is itself rich in potentially furthering a civilising effect, as we are reminded not to take the status quo for granted and to recognise such a societal course is neither static nor irreversible.

As Kilminster (2007) argues, the civilising process helps address some deeply socio-political questions, showing how individual drives can become socially regulated via forms of collective self-restraint. It is the specific detail of daily life that often reveals and illustrates what the civilising process entails, how we act towards others, what language and labels we use to describe those not like us, how we treat opponents, and so on. Collectively, Elias's

thesis shows how certain cultures (his analysis was restricted to European states) are working towards creating a balance between inhibitions of desire and collective flourishing. The more widely accepted the restriction placed on acting on personal whims is, the more one has to learn the highly nuanced rules serving to mute desires, value self-control, and accept the cultural constraints that contextualise how we should act, think and feel appropriately. Richards (2004) notion of emotional politics, part of what he refers to as therapeutic culture, is considered ''not a remissive reversal of the increasing restraint placed upon us by the civilising trend…. on the contrary, a further stage of the internalisation of restraint" (p342). Thus, affective intelligence and a degree of containment are crucial aspects of such a civilising process.

Another way of thinking about the civilising process and its usefulness for examining post-truth politics' is to recognise that in medieval society an absence of civilising forces meant there was a wider spectrum of what was deemed acceptable (in relation to responding to those who blocked your intended actions). Greater variety of possibility in this realm resulted in powerful bodies and individuals oscillating between cruelty and piousness and then back to cruelty again. In such a society, response to others was often based on whim, urge, impulse, avarice, lust: a state of permanent precariousness prevailed. Any eroding of civilising processes opens the prospect of our contemporary culture showing manifestations of such capriciousness. The backlash to what some call extreme political correctness (Hughes 2011) and the growth of populist political appeals in particular, are not only cognisant of this, but also utilise base arguments that corrode the consensus surrounding political discourse. The political classes, through acting with less restraint, disregard for others, in their own self-interests, and with evermore short-term perspectives, are, we suggest, contributing to de-civilising times.

De-civilising times
A neoliberal worldview coupled with a consumer culture, challenges a foundational element of this process, namely our conception of self. Contemporary notions prioritise self-worth, and privilege the individualistic human self-image and personal agency. In essence, a contemporary self that is characterised by more narcissistic tendencies (Lasch 1978, Elliot 1997, Nixon et all 2016) desensitises our sociality, and thus thresholds of embarrassment and shame rise. Consequently, we see our democratic rights but not our responsibilities.We engage in limited democratic processes primarily to assert and validate our way of living, our beliefs, and our existence. Such populist uses or misuses of democratic structures and processes undermine the very principles on which it is based- fairness, equality, recognition of minority voices and the dignity of all human beings. 'Trumpism' and other forms of populist political outpourings that are marked by disinhibition, vulgarity and personal truths are the result of these cultural shifts.

Our consumer culture skews us towards disinhibition of greed, accumulation of material possession, prioritising self-worth and a narrowing of public concerns (Marquand 2004, Slater 1997). Current Western neoliberal and marketised economic and culture spheres place less value on the state (Trentmann 2007) and thus downgrade notions of communal, shared, collective solutions. Ideas of 'political correctness' become targets of abuse rather than ideals to aspire to. Linked to this is the idea of a reduction in the value we place on

consensus, making it harder for a sense of common or public spaces (physically and metaphorically) to operate, and less public caring (Tronto 2001, Marquand 2004). This shift of public to private translates into a 'showing' rather than 'sharing' mentality. In Morrell's (2010) analysis of democracy, this is presented as a loss of empathy that reduces openness, tolerance and mutual respect. He argues this is due to privileging rational argumentation over emotional intelligence. To us it appears to be increasingly due to a deliberate denial of value being placed on attentiveness to others' views. Hence, in the UK for example, welfare cuts causing disproportionate pain to the most vulnerable have been widely accepted for nearly ten years, and,public libraries are closed with little fuss other than in the liberal press, with Amazon considered a perfectly acceptable privatised solution. Likewise, Boris Johnson displays feigned distress at the Conservative party's loss of a majority in the UK General Election of June 2017, though clearly has no empathy for his leader's loss of authority, (Independent, June 9th 2017).

Sennett's thesis (2000, 2007, 2011) articulating negative consequences of modern work practices and ethics on our general sense of character is a valuable lens here. This detailed account of societal changes might be considered a precursor to the decline of shame and the rise of narcissistic individualism underpinning the overall argument here. By character he is referring to the value we place on our relations to others, typically manifest in mutual commitment, long term orientation and a willingness to delay or deny personal gratification for the sake of a better shared future. His central argument, when analysing practices of 'new' capitalism, is that the qualities now demanded of us in the economic sphere are largely not conducive to what he refers to as 'good character' (p21). He cites the development of large networks of weak ties and the chameleon values of the new economy; flexible, agile, adept and resilient.

Flowing from this, personal dependency is considered a flaw, whilst entrepreneurship is lauded regardless of the frequent consequence of insecurity. Society accepts permanent instability and uncertainty that can 'divorce will from behaviour' (p31), and, from the perspective of a civilising process, reduces the importance we place on concern for others. Hughes, too, (2005) in discussing emotional labour, talks of more 'opportunistic, superficial and furtive orientations to work' (p607) where character is less found in moral domains, residing instead in individual discretion. Transferred to other spheres beyond the workplace, such forms of character are destructive to any sense of community. In such a world, there is little room for mutual sympathy, leading to a decline in our capacity to identify with the needs of others unless they coincide with our own. In political terms demonstrations of consideration for others is categorised as 'interfering do-gooders' and being too politically correct. Sennett (2007) goes on to deconstruct the notion of flexibility arguing how, through structural forces, it generates *discontinuous reinvention*. In the context of post-truth this concept is worthy of pondering further; discontinuities ignore or neglect the historical nature of political actions and decisions, thus, for example, allowing widespread rejection in the placing of value on continuity in relation to political positions adopted. In a world of re-engineering, reinvention and revision, what does it matter that a leader purports to believe in something one week and in a counter- belief the week after. Reinvention allowed the then Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott to equate her changed views on terrorism to a new hair style (Guardian, 28th May 2017)!

Inherent in social and cultural flexibility is fragmentation, where there are lower expectations of things being joined-up, including arguments made, and positions adopted. Hence, those in public office can both accept the science of global climate change but also advocate more fracking. Gabriel (2002) states that '...fluidity and flow, has emerged as one of the much-vaunted qualities of our times' (p171), suggestive of individuals' and organisations' willingness to radically redefine themselves opportunistically. With no firm anchoring, little sense of obligation is felt. Dwelling in a state of vulnerability - zero hours' contracts, anti-trade union legislation, distant globalisation forces, ever more hollowed out civic institutions - reduces our willingness to trust, and so feeds an atmosphere of anxiety. From iron cage to glass cage, using Gabriel's metaphor (2002), where image is paramount as we seek the admiring gaze and self-satisfaction of being the centre of attention. Established etiquette and the showing of once accepted ideas of proper conduct are now challenged and mocked as political correctness gone mad, in a fraught renegotiation of the values expressed in our system of manners (Nagle 2017).

Where emphasis is placed on the differences in our notions of truth rather than on any overlapping terrain, dialogue is replaced with anger. On June 12th 2017 a huge fire engulfed a high-rise block of 'social housing' flats in West London, within a few days one set of truths blamed 'inequality, greed and the decline of local public services', another set attributed part of the cause to 'environmental over-regulation and EU bureaucracy' (see Deborah Orr, Guardian June 17th). Here we witness an example of incongruity in terms of seeking a shared sense of appropriate balance between inhibitions of desire and collective flourishing; a fertile context for anger to become a dominant form of dialogue leaving little space for compromise. Of course, each societal epoch will have different views on what this balance *ought* to look like. Consequently, we can witness in both the U.K. Brexit and American Presidential campaigns of 2017 the oxymoronic idea of polite racism, what Murry (Independent, 2017) describes as an emerging 'slightly posher, better read, more respectable way of saying you'd rather not live next door to Muslims'. What is really important here is to recognise how, posh or not, feeing more able to articulate prejudice against groups of others in public spaces is a path towards countenancing prejudicial behaviours; it is an example of a de-civilising process in our post- truth age.

Shame thresholds rising
Part of Elias's exposition positing the development of civilising behaviours was based on observations of habits related to eating, body functions, speech, manners, and bedroom behaviour. In all of these spheres of life, conforming was largely achieved through social individuals increasingly wanting to avoid the socio-psychological state of shame. Authoritative agents perpetuating these ideas of social shame included one's superiors, family, church, work, and various apparatus of the state. Thus, we are dealing with historicised and ever changing affective sensibilities manifest in generally ever lower thresholds of embarrassment repugnance and disgrace. As these emotive drivers gained cultural resonance, so limitation and a drawing in of what was, and was not, considered customary took on a normative value.

Shame can be considered a negative self-evaluation, usually linked to reflecting on a prior or anticipated behaviour (Tangney and Dearing 2002). It is about experiences that generate

painful scrutiny of self with both a moral and relational aspect; moral as a judgment is occurring, relational as it influences how we think others see us (Zavaleta Reyles 2007). It acts upon what is deemed not right, not how you should be, not what you want to be like, nor what you want others to associate with you. Living with a clear ethical compass, close bonds and being part of groups that matter, along with well-developed empathy skills are considered core ways in which feelings of shame or the threat of such feelings, retain influence on our conduct (Gilbert 1997).

It is pertinent to note what Wouters (2007) refers to a shift in self-regulation, now less modulated by authoritative conscience, instead more malleable and at the whim of personal psyche. The Disneyfication' thesis (Bryman 1999) resonates here with its principle of shameless self-promotion. Contemporary culture is now characterised as one of reduced guilt, more self-obsession, and little regard being paid to others (Ewen 2001). Generational shifts in attitudes towards revealing once personal and private issues to an amorphous online world have changed significantly (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). A dominant discourse legitimises our right to choose, to be who we want to be, to decide our own niche lifestyle (Ewen 2001). Taken together this appears to be raising previous shame thresholds; it is now so important to show that we exist by asserting our sense of self-importance that once mortifying behaviour now registers as mildly awkward. Woodward (2000) notes the 'commercialisation of shame' (p231) in burgeoning reality TV shows where it is both exhibited and overlooked, where audiences are fascinated and bored at the same time. And as Welten et al (2012) argue, in life spheres where shame operates more lightly it becomes self-perpetuating, actions that might previously have resulted in social embarrassment that no longer do so, act to positively reinforce similar future behaviour. A cultural landscape where shame is a weaker form of socialisation impacts how we conceive of the self.

The rise of the narcissist personality
It is important to recognize here how the very notion of self is historicised (Sennett 2007, Burkett 2008) alerting us to its contingent nature. In broad terms, Burkett outlines how the emphasis has moved from self-mastery to worthiness, then onto a spiritual (moral) quality, and finally to self as thinker with capacity for reason. Emphasis in showing ethical sentiment placed prominence on overcoming impulses. Overall such a thesis is highly supportive of a civilising process where we submit self to various changing dominant codes of conduct.

In contrast, narcissism is typified by a state where self-centredness prevails (Gabriel and Lang 2006), Importantly, it is a social phenomenon with cultural ramifications (Lasch 1978,1980, Wouters 2007, Gabriel and Lang 2006, Kilminster 2008). For Lasch, the narcissist occupies a grandiose self-conception, using other people as instruments of gratification. Narcissism eakens the bonds of family and community and such individuals are anti-social. According to De Vos (2010) the 'culture of narcissism' is a prelude to the cult of authenticity where we clamour to find the true us by liberating the so-called real-ego. Indeed, De Vos goes on to claim that revealing such a cultural turn 'makes it exist' (p531). The contemporary notion of the 'saturated self' sees the concept as an assemblage of multiple selves, a kind of postmodern schizophrenia bereft of grand narratives. These fragments of fragments, where individuals' sense of self is ever more made up on the spot, means it can also be changed in an instant too. Self-narratives become coherent simply by being claimed as 'my story'. The idea of lifestyle through personal choices and a preoccupation with such a

self emerges (Bauman 2013). Indeed, Bauman goes further, introducing the notion of 'liquid modernity' as cultural collateral damage of a neoliberalism hegemony. Where once solid reliable predictable structures existed, now there is a permanently vague sense of possibility manifest as flexibility, uncertainty and self-entrepreneurship. Unsurprisingly in such a cultural context we find that 'the zeal of finding oneself has become daunting and too important to be left inside the meagre allotment of privacy' (Bauman 2011 p 89). This strong desire for recognition coupled with the fear of its denial means self-validity replaces the previous more societally organised validity of self.

Individuation increasingly acts as a motive to avoid engaging with the historic trajectory of ever more civility and self-restraint. It is very difficult to face yourself as inter-dependent at your core in a society that flaunts individuality, acclaims personal attributions for success, and rewards egotism (Welten et al 2012). And, when discussing leadership, Gabriel (2011) reminds us how excessive narcissism makes it easy to blur the offering of praise for achievements with praise for who I am. This is a form of image worship where we 'lose touch with reality…their vision becomes a reality whether it has been realised or not' (p4). Indeed, even in the rise of meritocracy we see the centrality of the individual; success is up to us, and merit assumes a disembodied subject (Sliwa and Johansson 2014). In their outline of shame and humiliation, Tangney and Dearing (2002) suggest a clear overlap between shame, proneness and narcissism, arguing that individuals often resort to narcissist behaviours to deflect feelings of shame through blaming, being resentful of and hostile towards others. Correspondingly, there seems to be a disengagement with the idea of dependency as a virtue, less restraint due to the potential impact caused on others and a growth in feelings of personal entitlement. The contemporary self, characterised by more narcissistic tendencies (Lasch 1978, Elliot 1997, Nixon et all 2016) desensitises our sociality. Thresholds of embarrassment and shame rise and our quest for authenticity becomes a search for feeling in control (Vannini and Franzese 2008).

Kilminster (2008) argues that the work of Elias and more pertinently Wouters recent work on informalization, provide a wider and more precise perspective on the nature of cultural narcissism. He talks of waves of societal infomalization occurring where relations between 'people and the social codes symbolising them have tended towards greater leniency' (p141). This is manifest in shifts in the balance between what is repressed and what is released, resulting in greater flux and plasticity in our modes of self-governance. Such a perspective places emphasis on changes in emotional management and individuals' relationships with collective symbols and institutions. Rather than considering narcissism simply through the lens of omnipotent individuality, Kilminster focuses on 'ways in which individuals cope with themselves and with their relationship with others' (2008, p136), going on to argue that it is unrealistic self-inflation with insufficient foundation in reality that is the defining feature of the narcissistic character. This is expressed in a lack of maturity in considering the perspective of others, self-delusion, image-obsession, self-centeredness, and entitlement, all prevalent in consumer societies where, posits Elliot (1997), material affluence leads to the dominance of a narcissistic personality rooted in the development of possession of love objects and excess. Such satisfactions are heightened by knowledge that others are being deprived (Fitchett 2002). Further, consumerist freedom offered through personal choice acts to compensate for any felt lack of control, fulfilling a

narcissistic function in offering enhancement of our self-image and elevating us above others around us (Cluley and Dunne 2012).

All of this is fertile ground for a psychological retreat into ourselves (Lasch 1980, Gabriel 2011). In such a cultural setting, we no longer fail, we are victims of others' actions so that our precious delusions of self-grandeur are protected (Dermody and Scullion 2001). Indeed, fuelled by 'likes' to our *Facebook* page, 'shares' of our *snapchat* photos of today's breakfast and comfort in our material possessions, we claim evidence of success and self-importance. The mere experiences of others count for little and 'so called' expert views are derided, as demonstrated so powerfully by former Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, in his anti-intellectual comments during the UK Brexit campaign in June 2016. In a culture where, 'public' is equated with negative dependency and waste, self is narrowly defined and personal choice triumphs over restraint, and where a sense of rage is the default when individual whims are threatened, there is a hollowing out of 'we' and a corroding of CIVIC character. Less value is placed on our relations to others. These are the conditions conducive for a President who 'tells it like it is' with, for example, his deliberately gross insensitive comment about women as sex objects.

Shame and narcissism: implications for the political landscape
Democratic politics is both fed by such a culture and contributes to it: fragmented weak political ideologies coupled with the rise of identity politics (Bernstein 2005), a widening gap in terms of social capital that acts as social bonds (Stolle and Hooghe 2005), and decline in trust and efficacy of political intuitions (Newton 2001, Hetherington 2005, Curtis and Park 2010) can all be seen to diminish the potency of shame in this sphere. In such an environment, it becomes dangerously normalised to see highly partial opinion websites positioned as 'news sources' flourishing, for example, *Guido Fawkes,* that contribute to a blurring of fact and fiction. Whilst Lilleker and Bonacci's (2017) analysis of *Facebook* in the UK Brexit campaigns of 2016, sees a growing homogeneity of political viewpoints we expose ourselves to;
symbolic of an anti-discursive engagement with politics where there is pride rather than shame in having a single perspective on complex issues.

The result of all this is evidenced in the following: claiming £350 million a week will be returned from the EU to the NHS being easily dismissed as promotional puffery when it suits those who benefitted from such pronouncements; the distribution of cards at school gates that read 'Polish scum now go home or else' whilst eventually condemned by the establishment, did not prevent a reported 41% increase in hate crimes in the three months after the UK voted to leave the EU; Russian Government officials backing Chechnya's brutal suppression of human rights of LGBT individuals, made easier when it is widely reported inside Chechnya that such 'sub-humans do not exist in such pure lands of southern Russia'. Trump, too, can demonstrate the power of shamelessness when proclaiming that his own first 100 days in office were a success of historic proportions, and when discussing Andrew Jackson, claiming the former President was 'really angry' as he watched the American civil war unfold. This, despite the fact that Jackson died sixteen years before the war began.

The wave of 'informalization' (Kilminster 2008) coupled with a culture of 'saturated-self' brings to the surface primal impulses and a structural prioritising of personal choices.

Notions of risk and reward, thus praise and blame, become a matter of individual responsibility and navigation (Beck 2002) rather than more collective in character. Our capacity to invest in civic matters and the public realm deteriorates (Sennett 2000). This is a generative context for an explosion of personal truths. Hence even those acting in a very public sphere are willing to acknowledge that their truth changes to suit the occasion. For example, in a recent biography of Donald Trump, David Johnston recalls how Trump relished taking a journalist to court and 'breaking him'. And in another instance, when responding to being cross-examined in court about allegations of manipulating his company's net worth and being asked 'Have you ever not been truthful?', his response was 'I try…my net worth fluctuates, and it goes up and down with the markets and with attitudes and feelings…my own feelings…but I try'.

A pertinent manifestation of a culture characterised as more narcissistic and less shaming is a growing sense of self certainty; we are sure that our views are the right ones and can easily find suitable 'facts' that correspond. Rorty's (1999) notion of 'final vocabulary' is useful here, defined as the set of words we use to tell our version of life. He posits that two types operate. The ironist recognises that their 'final vocabulary' is insufficient, they perpetually doubt and so seek to widen it so as to expand their ways of understanding. Those displaying narcissistic tendencies are prone to be without such doubts, and, Rorty argues, defend their final vocabulary with recourse to the idea of 'common sense', making their worldview seem logically final and obviously right. Such a perspective reduces the need to reflect, and diminishes the possibility that new experiences will generate new language, or what he calls a 'redescribing'. With fixed final vocabularies comes a fixed sense of truth – one that fits a fragile ego. The meta message in the language of populist post-truth is 'nobody gives a shit'.

One way of appreciating the coherence of political leaders who rely on and operate within a post-truth climate is to see them as tyrannical democrats who flatter themselves into believing that their shameless actions are actually courageous (see Tarnopolsky 2004). This misrecognising of shame means they position themselves as bravely standing up to the enemy, who are defined now as all those who disagree with them. This legitimises their actions creating an atmosphere of omnipotence fed on by others; it is a self-perpetuating act. Thus: Blair still 'knows' he was right over Iraq; Putin's aggressions are patriotic; Trump's response to negative media coverage is proof enough to him and his supporters that his own position is correct.

Post-truth; a cultural battle defining civic society
None of the above argument is designed to suggest there was once a zenith of political discourse devoid of mud, smear and lies. In the 1970's the public were told that the Labour party were 'cravenly subservient to trade union power' and by the 1980s Unions were framed as the 'enemy within'. Neil Kinnock, then Labour party leader, was vilified as a 'Welsh windbag', an 'angry redhead' who simply couldn't be trusted. In 2001 William Hague (Conservative party leader) was described as 'a wally', ridiculed for wearing a baseball cap and for his drawling Yorkshire accent. In 2005 Michael Howard, leader of the Conservative party was subjected to anti-Semitism, being portrayed as Shakespeare's Shylock. 'Red Ed', as Ed Miliband was dubbed the moment he won the election to lead the Labour party in 2010, was consistently represented as a 'geek', a 'wimp' and somebody who cannot even

eat a bacon sandwich without disaster ensuing! Considered in the context they appeared, it might be reasonable to argue that these are no more than the equivalent of advertising puffery defined as 'promotional material that makes broad exaggerated or boastful statements about a product or service that are subjective rather than objective, and that which no reasonable person would presume to be literally true' (Advertising Standards Authority 2017). More recent election media language such as 'crush the saboteurs' (*Daily Mail* April 30th 2017), 'Don't chuck Britain in the COR-BIN' (*Sun* June 6th 2017) and the Daily *Mirror's* 'Coalition of Crackpots' (June 8th) demonstrates much continuity in the dearth of political discourse rooted in a precise grasp of facts or rigorous judgement.

Whist negative commentary about political opponents is nothing new, what is significantly different now are the explicit cultural battles taking place where, what it is to live as part of civic society, appears to be pivotal in terms of what is being contested. Thus a need 'to take a longer-term view of the detrimental consequences of employing negative strategies… and to consider the longer-term societal consequences of consistently employing strategies characterised by the creation of doubt, fear, anxiety, violation and viciousness' (Dermody and Scullion (2003 p77) appears to be critical now.

Several sites where this cultural clash over what defines civic life is evident in the broader cultural landscape in which our politics operate are briefly outlined. Indicatively, we note, within a single copy of *The Times Higher Education* (7-13th December 2017 edition) scores of examples. Bath Spa University's Vice-Chancellor was unrepentant when discussing her £700,000 deal to depart. A digital entrepreneur award ceremony provoked prizes being given back as one university representative described the tone of the event as so sexist and bigoted it seemed to be from the past. A letter signed by over 80 academics expressing alarm at the 'censorious attitudes and campaigns' directed towards editors of a journal as part of a rising tide of intolerance. More subtly, there was a full-page advertisement highlighting the Queens Anniversary Prize award to the University of Birmingham which, using a Hollywood film genre, appears to hero- worship four individual academics! More specifically, within the political domain are the well-documented controversies about 'fake news' as part of a crisis reflecting a pervasive loss of faith in the idea of authority (Beckett 2017) and the rise of provocation in political discourse (Cammaerts 2012). Such cultural contestation is apparent in the easy credibility afforded to political messages regardless of how difficult it is to literally believe them, the speed with which we forget or dismiss prior contradictory messages and positions adopted by the same source who has now 'flipped', and the lack of humility (feeling humiliation) shown or expected from those whose truths unravel. Thus, the threats of a 'coalition of chaos' pre-the 2017 British General Election turns, as if by magic, into an agreement to 'guarantee stability' once the post-election parliamentary maths is established. The British Foreign Secretary is comfortable to be brazenly two-faced when talking of Trump's impending State Visit to the UK, claiming the US President is simultaneously 'stupefyingly ignorant' and 'a man of weight' (see *The Observer* comment page, June 11th 2017). A local council in the English Midlands justified a policy of fining people who sleep rough as a way of stamping out 'anti-social' behaviour, whilst detractors called it 'cruel and callous' (Pidd, Guardian 2017). A final contemporary manifestation of this 'civilising-decivilising' cultural clash playing out can be witnessed in the various sexual harassment cases that have become widespread in reportage and commentary. Here we briefly focus on those surrounding 'former' Hollywood star and

Democrat supporter Kevin Spacey. His response to mounting allegations about his conduct (*'I'm living as a gay man now')* appears to be a declaration of a lifestyle choice 'justifying' his behaviour and diminishing the need for responsibility and so blame (Scullion 2017). By implication he reminds us not to victimise a victim (I'm using membership of minority group as an excuse), asks us to recognise the apparently inherent promiscuity of gay men (don't fret, it's just what we do) and tries to explain his actions away by purging any gendered power relations (you should focus on male female relations). His response reveals a character who *may be bad but knows he's good at it* (mirroring Lago in Othello, a Shakespearian character he longed to play). This speaks to a particular type of power that has largely become accepted, even expected, in our politics, personified by vast ambition coupled with ethical inadequacy. Spacey's misandry, as with misogyny, represents a particularly virulent and widespread form of indifference to others, showing an absence of sensitivity *most especially* to those who are most different to ourselves and whom we have the greatest disagreements with. This is the antithesis of polyvocal democratic culture. And It is this type of consequence for civic culture, flowing from politics operating in a climate of post truth, that we have tried to highlight in this paper.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that post-truth politics can be located in cultural changes which sees some reversal in the process of civilising that means shame thresholds have increased and disinhibition become more prevalent. Contemporary notions of the individual as more self-obsessive give permission for more narcissistic characteristics to be articulated and legitimised. The implications for discourse, most especially political discourse, where notions of shared and public are more apparent, is one of personalised rage and far less communal listening that goes beyond established appreciations of conformation bias (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Notions of truth are appropriated by individualised self-serving opinion, and common ground is actively less sought or found. The arguments here speak to a sense of cultural corrosion. Populism of all forms are shameless, unreflective and deliberately immodest. A civilising process that 'resulted in widespread distaste of dirt, danger, and disregard for others is replaced with legitimised bullying, bigotry and ignorance' (Scullion 2016 p59). Nearly three decades ago Mennell (1990) outlined what he referred to as a theoretical decivilising process. It *would be* marked by shorter chains of interdependencies, the re-emergence of violence in the public sphere, a decline in mutual identification, reduced pressure on individuals to restrain expressions of impulse and, vitally for our argument, increased 'fantasy-content' modes of knowledge. If modern universal suffrage was borne in part through a gradual civilising process as outlined earlier, and if we are starting to witness selective rejection/reversal of this process, it follows that we need to reconsider such societal governance arrangements. Put another way, when demons democratically gain power, it may be time not only to challenge the demons but also the process that afforded them such authority.

To know and reflect on decivilising moments as illustrated earlier, offers up opportunities to respond. Woodward (2000) in her outlining of traumatic shame demonstrates the non-linearity of levels of shame thresholds; the very attentiveness being shown toward rises in shamelessness contain the seeds of its potential reversal. As Tarnopolsky (2004) carefully argues, shame is not simply a binary oppositional concept, shame and shameless. Instead it

is a more nuanced notion requiring an appreciation of context, user's intent and the receiver's current behaviours. It can be both useful and damaging in evoking open and inclusive forms of political discourse. Drawing on Plato's dialogues Tarnopolsky refers to 'flattering' and 'respectful' shame. The former is the way in which we more commonly incorporate shame into contemporary life where it points up difference in order to humiliate. The later type of shame has a salutary quality aimed at evoking deliberation and reflection and can be a moral guide and a useful civilising check by pointing out shared human frailties. There is potential for civic life to benefit from this respectful shame offering a space for showing common vulnerabilities. 'This discomforting and perplexing recognition in the experience of shame can motivate us to try to recapture…positive affect of association' (Tarnopolsky 2004 p478). Such experiences *may* shake us from comfort zones where we over-normalise situations that become deeply restrictive of alternative voices. Woodward (2000) concurs, powerfully illustrating in her analysis of the novel about racism 'The Bluest Eye' the revelation that 'some varieties of shame carry that charge' of transformation (p227) because they contain cognitive as well as emotional experience and response. Thus 'out of a generative tension between what ideally should have been done…and what was done' (p228) a learning experience emerges.

In order to concretise this conception of shame we *might* ponder the potency of, for example, Ministers and other public officials changing as a result of the *Grenfell Tower* disaster and the deeply inadequate initial official response to it. The backlash against President Trump's personal and crude attack on news reporter Mika Brzezinski offers up a moment where Trump *could* ruminate on future communications. Respect and dignity that recognises both the plurality of polity *and* the multiplicity of others is a pragmatic way forward. Where many forms of 'the good life' are tolerated, accepted, and at times positively embraced, the intensity of shame can be reduced, being confined to a particular aspect of the 'others' life, thus causing less resistance to a dialogue that is premised on connection. This hopeful perspective amidst an apparently ruptured, impulsive and illiberal contemporary politics is further elaborated in Richards (2018) recent account of popular culture and politics. One of his central arguments is that from this fearful climate a renewed sense of connection can emerge, where, through efforts combining personal and social restraint and release, a containing relationship with others and the external world is established. What Richards is referring to is a confining blend of passion and responsibility, a politics that produces 'a major source of emotional containment and object of emotional investment' (p91).

However, respectful shame and a refocusing on what holds us together may be increasingly difficult to achieve, in part because more self-obsessed individuals who are ashamed will, most likely, instinctively feel unfairly judged, quickly becoming angry and rejecting, so avoiding the reflective learning potency of the experience. 'When we are enraged, we easily mistake anger for moral correctness…I'm really angry so I must be right' (Anhalt 2017 p2). This righteousness acts as a barrier to empathy. Also worth noting, is how the psychological state of narcissism is linked to positive states of high self-esteem, being socially extrovert, and reporting a sense of happiness (Campbell 2001) and well-being (Rose 2002). As we have argued above, cultural shifts that desensitise us to civilising processes, raise shame thresholds and see a flourishing of narcissistic qualities helping to generate a post-truth landscape. The use of respectful shame is problematic because the principle of charity,

acknowledgement and value afforded to that which is shared with the 'other' (Davidson 2001), is largely absent. Core democratic principles in such a decivilised age have to confront a wider culture where shameless personal truths are afforded favoured status to protect our fragile egos.

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