

## Trying to find answers in common

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There are mornings when my usual routine of waking up, surveying the news and deciding what to write is broken. This morning is one such occasion. The reports from Manchester are shocking. Of course, and rightly, they block immediate concern over other issues. My sympathies go to all who might be impacted, including those who are providing care.

I do not apologise though for not dwelling on the detail. My concern is not changed by asking the obvious question, 'what's this all about?' That question was, curiously, on my mind as I went to bed last night. After quite a long day I reflected then on why society felt it worthwhile paying a bunch of fairly bright people to come to events like the one I am at in Brussels to discuss how and why society organises its structures of political power in the way it does.

The cynic could, of course, say that this is an exercise in aggrandisement by the politicians. After all, doesn't the study of politics and political economy suggest that what they are doing is significant, and no one in politics is without an ego? I have to say that's a pretty poor explanation. The resulting studies are by no means flattering in many cases, are rarely personal, and consider the issue far too broadly for those involved in this world to be considered props for an elite seeking to sustain its significance. There must be another reason then.

The conclusion, which is personally significant as I am relatively new in this academic field, is that this study matters because understanding what it's all about is itself significant. Whether or not the question can be definitively answered is not as important as asking it. That I should say is good news: I think definitive answers in short supply. Indeed, that was a point powerfully made in some discussion yesterday as the only explanation for some of the issues we still face ten years after the Global Financial Crisis.

Knowing that is in itself important. Most of life is to me about answering the question 'what is it all about?' Directly or indirectly I suspect that is true for many others. At one time priests tried to supply the answers for many people. For some they still do. For

others faith in politics provides explanation. On occasion the two combine. For many neither is now sufficient: indeed, the rise of populism in its broadest sense can be seen as an expression of a quest for certain answers where what is desired is in decidedly short supply.

Do I in this situation think it worth investing in seeking answers? I doubt you'll be surprised that my answer is yes, although I'd add that if it was not I would simply move on: I am not seeking to self justify my inclusion in such a group by coming to this conclusion.

And what has this to do with Manchester, and the pain and grief that will be all too apparent today? Superficially very little. Nothing I or anyone else at the conference I am at will, of course, do anything to relieve any of that pain. I make no pretence at all that it does make the world of those whose lives have forever been changed any different today.

But asking why this happens, what it is all about, how we are so fractured that some want to so violently disrupt the lives of others in ways that almost everyone else will find so appalling; well all that is important. Even if we have no absolute answers and no 'ism' will never be a complete explanation seeking answers in common does make sense.

What I stress is the 'in common' bit. What is obvious is that commonality is what is in short supply. In Manchester the consequence is distressingly obvious, but day in, day out that is true in so many other ways if only we open our eyes to it. As Jo Cox was fond of saying, what we have in common is actually much greater than what tears us apart. When we fail to see that tragedy follows.

A tragedy has happened.

I recommend that we keep asking why, and that we try to find answers in common.