# Between passion and reason

## Rethinking critical urban scholarship in populist times

## Mark Davidson

# Between passion and reason
## *Rethinking critical urban scholarship in populist times*

Mark Davidson

CITY has always been a forum for passionate urban scholarship. But what role do the passions play in urbanization(s) today? And should we even make room in urban scholarship for such a volatile part of the human condition? Across the vast breadth of contemporary urban scholarship, today we find deeply paradoxical answers to these questions. So much contemporary urbanization is explained as being confined and codified by free-market rationalities [Peck 2013. Constructions of Neoliberal Reason. *Oxford: Oxford University Press*]. With increasing force, these rationalities are then mobilized in technological innovations that have the power to condition the perception and behavior of citizens [Wyly and Dhillon 2018. "Planetary Kantsaywhere." City 22 (1): 130–151]. Our casino capitalist, smart cities therefore seem bent on pursuing and installing the whatever-the-cost perverse urban rationalities of climate catastrophe [Madden 2019. "Editorial: City of Emergency." City 23 (3): 281–284]. And yet, this unreasonable rationality is now producing symptomatic populisms that are distinctly passionate. Few cities have been immune to popular sentiments that have rejected appeals to reason, free market or not [Rossi 2018. "The Populist Eruption and the Urban Question." Urban Geography 39 (9): 1425–1430]. Many citizens seem sick of the incessant compulsion to reason, they simply want their desires realized. How then should critical urban

©   2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

1

*scholarship approach the current confluence of (free market) rationality and (populist) passion? This contribution examines this question via the political philosophy of David Hume. Isaiah Berlin is said to have claimed of Hume that 'No man has influenced the history of philosophy to a deeper or more disturbing degree.' Hume's arguments about the primacy of passions can help us to understand how the remnants of neoliberal rationalities cohabit today's cities with various populisms. More importantly, Hume might also offer insights into how critical scholarship can have progressive purchase in such turbulent times.*

## Introduction

It must be admitted that passionate scholarship treads a fine line. To be passionate about one's own work, its findings and implications, is often necessary if it is to be read. Yet being passionate brings trappings. An unyielding belief in one's conclusions might well ensure a readership, but it also can lead to stunted reflection and a deadly dose of confirmation bias. These dangers seem doubled if one's work entails an engagement with social injustice. It is one thing to passionately debate the merits of chemical composition, quite another to tackle the merits of incarceration and discrimination. The need for this distinction is two-fold. First, scholarship that engages with social issues tends not to be confined within expert communities. Detached objectivism rarely seems appropriate. Second, social justice scholarship inevitably engages at the peripheries of science, where the disinterested standards of the hard sciences are unavailable (Popper 1962). The relationship between passion and epistemological certitude is therefore fundamentally different where ethical questions are resolved the least.

While all scholarship, regardless of scientific discipline, is motivated by passions, the scholar of social justice is challenged by a closeness to passions playing out beyond the ivory tower and a frequent absence of agreed ethical standards. This is the treacherous but fertile ground that *CITY* has long ploughed. It has often done so by facing the challenges head on, bringing the passions of activists into dialogue with academics and regularly setting up confrontations about parts of the urbanization process that lack conceptual or ethical consensus. The resultant white heat inside this little crucible of urban scholarship has likely meant, at least for some, that our fine line has often been strayed from. But it must also be accepted that our treacherous line moves regularly. There are few moments in history where social injustices seem clearly defined.

During the past four decades, critical urban scholarship has had a consistent, if not singular (Davidson and Martin 2013), foe. Much ink has been used documenting how neoliberal reason has transformed the urbanization process (Madden 2019; Wyly and Dhillon 2018). For some, this has culminated in the entire (urbanized) planet dancing to the tune of neoliberalism (Brenner 2018; Davidson and Iveson 2015a). It has not been difficult to translate a passionate distaste for the associated social outcomes into convincing critical scholarship.

It is beyond the comprehension of most thinking people to not be repelled by the brutalities imposed by evictions, disability benefit cuts and school closures. The worst of the neoliberal project has therefore mitigated some of the dangers associated with passionate scholarship. Debates about ethical judgements are rarely needed in egregious cases. Nor have concurrent philosophical and theoretical shifts within the social sciences pressed the question of scientific standards (e.g. Davidson 2010; Feyerabend and Hacking 2010; Latour 1988).

It is therefore unsurprising that the (re)emergence of political populism is a disruptive force both outside and within the academy. Populism is not a political project founded in preformulated rationalities (Stanley 2008). Rather populism is driven by a harnessing of passions *despite* reason. Although resurgent populism is playing out differently across space, populist movements can only have an unstable, if any, connection to neoliberal reasoning. The relationship between reason and passion is therefore reorganizing itself within the political process. If neoliberal reason has provided a consistent foil for critical urban scholarship (Peck 2013), recent political changes suggest this arrangement is undergoing a significant shift (Brown 2019). Any such hegemonic weakening provides warrant enough to interrogate how passionate scholarship should respond to an increasingly passionate world.

## Horse or cart? Hume's deeply disturbing proposition

No person has written more profound words about the relationship between reason and passion than 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume's mediations on the relation between reason and passion turned millennia of philosophy on its head (Baier 2011). He also continues to be celebrated for his arguments on induction, causation and the self (Baier 2010). But, perhaps predictably given the longevity of his work, Hume is also a controversial figure. He has been criticized as a philosophical forerunner for more recent neoliberals, a founder of the thought that provided the intellectual basis for Hayek and Friedman (Altvater 2009). His limited writing on race has also seen him labeled a white supremacist (Garrett and Sebastiani 2017). The fact that an 18th century philosopher, however brilliant, might hold views that are today deeply problematic should not shock any reader. Alas, it is worth stating that we are not looking for divinity here. Indeed, we can use Hume's own secular skepticism as fuel to guard against reading any philosopher as having flawless, transcendental insight.

Since Aristotle, philosophers had understood humans as rational beings. This notion was to become crystallized into the continental rationalist movement by Descartes. When, at just 25 years of age, Hume writes *A Treatise of Human Nature* it is as a direct response to the conclusions drawn in Descartes' philosophical writings. The second book of Hume's three-part *Treatise* is entitled 'On the Passions.' It begins with the following proposition: 'As all the perceptions of the mind may be divided into *impressions* and *ideas*, so the impressions admit of another division into *original* and *secondary*' (Hume 2011, BI, PI, SI, 241; *emphasis in original*). Hume is here starting with a simple idea about human understanding. First, he claims, we receive sensory inputs. These are *original* impressions sensed by our bodies, mostly as pleasure or pain. Second, these senses become

3

'reflective impressions'. Reflective impressions respond to original impressions and, according to Hume, are the passions that motivate humans to act. He colors this sketch further by dividing reflective impressions into two types, calm and violent. Calm impressions are the senses of 'beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects' (Hume 2011, 242). Violent impressions 'are the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility' (Hume 2011).

Impressions, in the secondary form of passions, are therefore the stuff that Hume's naturalist philosophy suggests humans start with. By this measure, passions are not something we can rationally evaluate since they precede reasoned judgement. However, we can learn to understand how passions structure human engagement. We know that humans dislike extreme cold and so will seek warmth, or that someone will usually rush to a meeting if they find themselves running late. Desire, wanting something, therefore emanates from the passions. Blackburn (2008, 59) describes Hume's concept of desire as an 'intervening variable, a theoretical construction or description of a fact about persons that can be deployed in countless circumstances to anticipate what to expect, or to instruct us on how to control or react to them'. This description of desire hints at the empirical and humanistic basis of Hume's thought. Passions tend to be common, generating shared desires.

Yet Hume recognizes that shared desires tend not to result in homogenous human action. Belief must be paired with desire:

> The job of belief is to fit the world, to represent it as it is. The job of desire or passion is to get the world to fit it: in other words, it is to activate the subject to change things so that the desire is satisfied. Action requires both. Cognition without passion would be inert, and passion without cognition would be at sea. A belief is an opportunity for a desire to become practical; a desire gives a belief an opportunity to become practical. (Hume 2011)

Making sense of and activating one's desires is therefore the job of practical reasoning. Reason does not tell you what to desire. Rather it serves to condition passions. How this conditioning occurs is a pivotal question in Hume's philosophy. Hume recognizes that practical reasoning can take different forms and have different ends. As passionate animals, reason is rarely applied consistently, and beliefs vary. So often our passions present us with lots of contradictory options. We might be tempted to spend our entire paycheck on a slap-up dinner, reasoning that the short-term gain is optimal. On another occasion, we might take a long-term view and reason that frugality is a better option, deferring our fine dining appetite for another occasion. Reasoning thus involves the balancing of concerns and priorities. Just how Hume thinks we do this becomes a central topic in Book III of *Treatise*, Of Morals.

Hume's moral philosophy is a naturalist account of how social arrangements evolve from collective processes of reasoning about passions. He is responding to the presiding Christian theology that claimed moral righteousness was part of the received divine order. Hume's atheism made him a dangerous radical in the eyes of the clergy and he withheld his *Dialogues on Natural Religion* for posthumous publication. Hume sees humans as passionate creatures gifted with language. Language, both spoken and written, affords humans an ability to

develop and reproduce complex social arrangements. The challenge that Hume must face, following Hobbes, is identifying what motivates humans to develop social cooperation in the first place. Hume's answer is that they come from a 'noble source', that being 'our capacity for sharing good and ills, through sympathy, and acting for the common good' (Baier 2011, 49). This position is firmly empiricist. He rejects the idea that morality stems from a transcendental source, but baulks at the idea that human societies are inherently immoral; an idea Nietzsche would later develop. For Hume, morality is easy to see in the language and actions of everyday life. Crucially, this meant that moral goodness is not something that the philosophical have privileged access to.

Central to Hume's moral philosophy is therefore the claim that humans have a unique ability for sympathy. He means multiple things by the term, but it can be summarized as the communication of affect between individuals and the related invoking of benevolence (Agosta 2014). Morality is therefore a social effect, whereby our ability to understand *and* feel something of the situation of others provides the substance for ethical judgement. For Hume morality is an inversion of the fundamental relation between passions and reason, with sympathy first ideational and then felt:

> What is principally remarkable in this whole affair is the strong confirmation these phenomena give to the foregoing system concerning the understanding, and consequently to the present one concerning the passions; since these are analogous to each other. It is indeed evident, that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in *our* mind as mere ideas, and are conceived to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact. It is also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them. All this is an object of the plainest experience, and depends not on any hypothesis of philosophy. (Hume 2011, BII, S11, 279; *emphasis in original*)

Here Hume leaves us without a transcendental foundation. Moral ideas emerge out of how we understand the fate of others, and by extension, our relationship to those fates. Our imagination plays a critical role in forming moral positions, as do fictional accounts of human conduct that let us play out moral dilemmas. Hume therefore gives us the ability to understand why writers like Dostoevsky reveal so much about the human condition.

Ethics thus becomes the stuff of judgement. By being able to sympathize with others, we consistently decide whether to admire or distain the actions of others. These are decisions we make according to passions; we feel morality. As Blackburn (2008, 62) describes it:

> Ethical verdicts including the names of the vices and virtues, include a 'valency' or direction: like love and hate, they point us towards or away from things. The function of ethics is to adjust our passions, to make us feel our common humanity, to respond to the villainy of Iago or the nobility of Antigone by our 'fellow feeling' with the other people on whom they impinge, and then to have within ourselves, by a process of contagion, a like repulsion from behaving in the worse ways, and a desire to imitate the better.

By associating ethics with the passions, Hume gives us insight into why ethical decisions are so difficult. He recognizes that we are constantly drawn into problematic situations by our passions. Action and ethical decision-making are linked by a competition between passions. The problem for Hume is therefore not understanding human weakness; as passionate animals we routinely make unethical choices (Blackburn 2008, 63). Rather it is how reason is stewarded to perform duties, obligations and defer gratification. As Christopher Hitchens once commented on the preaching of Ayn Rand, 'I don't think there is any need to have essays advocating selfishness among human beings, I don't know what your impression has been. But some things require no further reinforcement.'

## On populism, neoliberalism and passions

Populism is the dominant force in contemporary politics (Brown 2019), yet few agree on how to define it (Bain-Selbo and Dunn 2019; Pieterse 2019). This is a problem of finding the normative dimension (Stanley 2008). Pieterse (2019, 111) provides a useful starting point for thinking about populism as style over substance:

> Populism, speaking to people directly, means speaking to what people want, persuasively enough to stir up emotion and support. Several accounts treat populism as essentially a political style of bypassing institutions and elites and addressing people directly, a 'performative political style'. Obviously, this style can be used in different ways and for widely different purposes, so populism doesn't actually tell us much at all.

Viewing populism in this way, as an anti-establishment political style that uses any means possible to appeal to popular sentiments (i.e. 'the people'), emphasizes the relevance of Hume's philosophy today. Populism appeals to the passions and works to deny the civilizing influence of reason.

Birmingham (2019) makes a convincing case for associating contemporary 'populism' with political movements that have emanated from traditionally right-wing organizations. Birmingham (2019), contra Laclau (2018), argues that these movements involve a distinct type of political subjectivity compared to left-wing social movements that have also appealed to the idea of 'the people'. Galston (2018) equates this to the tribalism inherent within the populist notion of 'the people'. When populists claim 'the elites' have exploited 'the people', there includes a claim that an exclusive community exists. By associating 'the people' with some normative good, it provides a means to say that whatever 'the people' think must be right. There is no need for, as Hume argues, passions to be conditioned by reason. Populism therefore makes it possible for politicized human sentiments to avoid normative evaluation (i.e. reasoning from sympathy).

Of course, this process works differently across time and space. Yet, whether one looks to France, India, Poland, the United Kingdom, or the United States, some features seem consistent (also see Brown 2019; Stanley 2008). Most populists have little regard for fiscal discipline. National debt grows, long-term budget projections see deficits increasing, and every election brings yet another round of spending promises. Immigration has become a, if not *the*, central

political topic; often despite changes in actual migration numbers. So often this is because immigration speaks directly to the thing which gives populism coherence, the tribal idea of 'the people'. Populism must always be in the process of prescribing inclusion and exclusion, and given populism is a politics of passions, appeals to skill quotas or labor market needs fall flat. It is much more effective for populists to solicit our apprehensions about the unfamiliar.

How then does neoliberalism operate in these populist times? It is first worth repeating what was said about the post-2007 version of neoliberalism: that after the Great Recession, neoliberalism staggered on as a zombie (Peck 2010), dead but dominant (Smith 2008). It is not what it once was. We must also acknowledge that despite being one of the most-often written words in academia for the last three decades, it still defies consensual definition. It is, just as populism is, a slippery term. Peck's (2013) historiography of neoliberalism is titled *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. The book's project is, in one sense, an attempt to deal with this slipperiness. Neoliberalism is presented as a particular form of reasoning, derived by Hayek from 19th century liberals and reformulated and repackaged by Hayek's acolytes in Chicago. And yet, once out of the seminar room, reasoned arguments for free markets, deregulation and individualism are inevitably blanched by the everyday.[1] So, Peck's project 'retains a singular focus on the articulation and realization of the free-market project' (xiv).

The predominant image conjured by Peck's account is of ideas being sullied. Passed through the hands of politicians and bureaucrats, neoliberal reason attains layers of reformist grime. If it were a book, the application of neoliberal reason fills clean pages with annotations and coffee stains, turns crisp spines into unbound pages and sticky tape. But some kernel must remain, some trace of Hayek's pen persists. This, for Peck (2013), is a program of 'market-modeled reconstruction' (7) based on intellectual arguments about the proactive, premarket use of state power (Hayek 2011). Neoliberalism is therefore distinguished from prior laissez-faire economic liberalism by its endorsement of ardent statecraft.

Actual-existing neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore 2002) becomes about a persistence of reason. This involves an ongoing war against the competing demands of the passions. Even the most cursory read of Hayek makes this clear. When Hayek (2007) writes about the law he argues: 'The important thing is that the rule enables us to predict other people's behaviour correctly, and this requires that it should apply to all cases—even if in a particular instance we feel it to be unjust' (117). In Hume's terms, this is clearly an insistence that reason, in this case the neoliberal variety, takes precedence over passions (i.e. an impression that something is unjust). No matter the sense of injustice, reason must prevail! From Hume's perspective, neoliberalism has therefore been a distinct political project precisely because it has managed to impose abstract, reasoned social reform despite popular passions.

This intransigence is a consistent concern within various critiques of neoliberalism. Take trickle down economics as the prime example. This is a reasoned theory which has been shown to not work in practice (Krugman 2017). Witnessing policies justified by their ability to assist the poor (e.g. make better housing stock available, create better paying jobs, increase wages) leaving people impoverished cannot but generate sympathy. It is only an insistence on (neoliberal) reason that can continue the project. As Hume well knew, even before

7

the horrors of the 20th century (Arendt 1973), reason is no guarantor of justice. This suspicion of reason made Hume unique among his contemporaries and a fierce critic of Rousseau's absolutism. It was also the basis of Hume's peculiar conservatism, believing as he did that societies had somehow managed to develop social traits that helped them balance the extremes offered by passion and reason. For Hume, the Enlightenment's rationalists therefore threatened to undermine these means of social cooperation and co-existence.

Populist politics are distinct from the neoliberalism we have become used to. Populism offers to quench popular desires. It makes unreasonable promises. Its appeal to tribal affiliation relies on an inevitable fear of the unfamiliar, without pause to consider if there is anything to be fearful of. In contrast, neoliberalism has always relied on constructed reason (Peck 2013). Unlike populism, which has no consistent reform agenda, neoliberalism is distinctively normative. We have spent forty years filling academic journals with critique showing this reasoned project to be all-too-often perverse. This documentation of injustice has frequently used empirical findings to generate the appropriate passions (i.e. injustice, hence disgust). Our passions have demanded a different mode of reasoning and often the protection of social traits deemed undesired by the reasoned neoliberal reformers. But how does this model of passionate scholarship translate in an era of populism?

## Conclusion: rethinking critical urban scholarship in populist times

The rise of populist politics presents a significant challenge for critical urban scholarship. Although neoliberal reason remains part of our political landscape, it is now morphed and increasingly replaced by populist politics (Brown 2019). Populism is a different analytical and political problem. No longer can the dominant direction of critical (urban) scholarship be a passionate critique of (perverse) reason. Critical analysis of populist urban reforms will now have to engage with passionate, not disinterested and/or reasoned, motives. If we have become used to challenging what reformers appear to think, the critical emphasis must shift to recasting the desires they seek to fulfill. This is less certain ground, since passions are inducted into very different ideological projects.

Hume thought we can only meet these challenges by understanding how moral consensus emerge. That is, how passionate desires are stewarded into viable social arrangements. For Hume, 'morality depend(s) not, as many of his predecessors had held, on what God demands of us but on what we ourselves find acceptable and praiseworthy' (Baier 2011, 40). If only a starting point, Hume directs us toward the difficult territory that critiques of populism must travel. Neoliberal reason has been exceptionally powerful in part because it eludes conversations about what is acceptable and praiseworthy. As Hayek suggests, decisions about virtuousness need to be ignored if reason is to ensure state and market efficiency. Populism does nothing of the kind. It appeals directly to our passions and desires. Politics therefore becomes the business of deciding how these passions and desires are articulated. For Hume, we must strive to articulate passions in ways all of us would find virtuous. While Hume would disdain

the cold reasoning of free marketers (see Blackburn 2008, 70), he would also recoil at how many dishonorable populists are now seeking to fulfill our desires for economic security and social stability.

As populist politics play out in the urban, the results are, by definition, going to be messy. Without a consistent normative agenda, populism inevitably involves an eclectic array of reforms and proposals (Rossi 2018). Housing programs can be both fiscally unviable (i.e. false promises) and exclusionary (i.e. focused upon proscribed populations). Yet, they can also be eminently desirable (i.e. affordable housing for everyone). Urban development agendas can become increasingly reactionary and new categories of undesirable, dangerous and irresponsible are being defined. At the same time, we are promised an end to urban deprivation and uneven development. All of this will undoubtedly sit alongside pre-existing neoliberalisms, sometimes comfortably, sometimes not. The only progressive political option seems to be an engagement with the passions that drive populism and, at least for us here, the passions that motivate us to transform urbanized societies. This Humean take admittedly leaves us without much instruction. How does one go about providing virtuous framings of the passions? One must look more broadly for inspiration. Orwell, as the only writer who got the big (populist) political questions (imperialism, fascism, communism) of the 20th century right, is as good a place as any to look.

Orwell's 1945 essay on nationalism is particularly instructive. Orwell starts by making a distinction of some insight. Nationalism, he claims, is 'first of all the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labeled "good" or "bad"' (2002, 856). He contrasts this to patriotism, a 'devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people' (2002, 866). This leads Orwell to claim:

> Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality. (2002)

This passage can easily be read in Humean terms. Orwell recognizes that both nationalism and patriotism are driven by emotions; that they are motivated by the same passions. But these passions can be mediated by reason in distinct ways. Orwell, writing in 1945, is, of course, asking his readers to choose the morally virtuous option. He clearly associates patriotism with human qualities he can hold in esteem. The opposite is true for nationalism. Same passions, yet dramatically different belief systems.

What then does this mean for the critical urbanist? I think it provides something of a template for democratically contesting how populist passions are playing out in the city today. Anti-immigrant movements within our cities might well be driven by passionate attachments to place and community that are open to critical engagement and reconstruction. Revanchist policies that exploit the desire to inflict harm on the proscribed 'other' can be remade into problems that

9

necessitate solidarity and understanding. Hume was himself a great believer in the stock of knowledge that societies already possess for the remedy of such social conflicts. He put faith not in philosophers, but the social agreements and compromises that communities had built over the long-term. Thus, one glaring problem of abstract moral reasoning, as Orwell (1972) continually insisted, was that it all too often marginalized and ignored already-operative ethics.

Hume's central lesson for today's critical urbanist might then be that the decline of neoliberal reason must not become an invitation for replacing it with 'critical' reason. Populism reinforces Hume's point that you are always starting with passions; that passions are the cause of human agency. Reason simply modifies the motivations, hopefully in virtuous ways. As populism releases waves of passionate urbanisms, we will be well served to listen to what populist movements are demanding (see Davidson and Iveson 2015b). This act of listening positions the critical scholarly enterprise as being concerned with formulating and arguing for a virtuous framing. This denies us the categories of tribalism (e.g. good/evil, reasonable/unreasonable) and insists that the difficult job of understanding the passions cannot be transcended and/or superseded by reason.

Critical urban scholarship might therefore seek to make greater use of the social conventions that Hume found to be pivotal to the civilizing of passions. Where neoliberals once justified urban renewal projects based on abstract reasoning about economic efficiency and liberty, now urban renewal is formulated to quench a thirst for community, inclusion and apportionment. These hankerings represent fundamentally different objects of critical inquiry. They cannot be deemed unreasonable or the ploys of economic elites. They originate from passions that precede reason. Nor can they be said to be illegitimate, since they are passions commonly shared, if not reasoned in anything like the same ways. We are not therefore dealing in the problem of ideological imposition or deception, as was so often perceived to be the case with neoliberal reform (Peck 2010). Rather our concern needs to be with how populism frames and modifies newly fueled passions. On this point, Hume instructs us to look around, to see how the cultures we are variously part of have previously managed to direct our passions in ways we can hold in esteem. We must look at how we've managed to foster inclusive modes of community-building (e.g. political institutions, modes of speech and dialogue, methods of cultural learning and sharing) and how we've managed to adjudicate social disagreement and difference (e.g. institutions and cultures of democracy). Given the distinctly urban character of the current epoch, the urbanist should have more to say about this than most.

All of this suggests the need for significant shifts in popular modes of critical urban scholarship. While critiques of neoliberalism are neither homogeneous nor completely representative of critical urban scholarship, they are typical of a gravitation towards the philosophical and abstract. Today's populism demands that critical urban scholarship eschews such tendencies. Understanding passionate politics and working to foster virtuous framings demonstrates a need to avoid some of the abstract theoretical debates that have occupied critical urban theorists. Populist times demand more grounded scholarship; the ethnographic gaining more attention than the philosophic, the historical taking precedent over the transcendental. It seems this is the only way to ensure that critical urban scholarship has political relevance today.

To be sure, this is not a new message. In 1940, Orwell delivered the same message in the form of characteristically cutting criticism. Commenting on how enamored intellectuals of various stripes had become with abstract, systematic explanation in an age of fascism, he wrote: 'the thing that frightens me the most about the modern intelligentsia is their inability to see that human society must be based on human decency, whatever the political and economic forms may be' (Orwell 2005). In a world of renewed populisms, where policy programs and urban reforms are often impossible to predict, this criticism reinforces the renewed relevance of Hume. Hume's work gives us the means to see the passions that propel populism as inevitable but impresses on us our ability to search out and foster the social conventions and cultural norms that condition these fluctuating motives. And in this regard, we might heed Orwell's criticism about where critical social and urban analysis must begin.

## Disclosure statement

## Note

1    It is worth noting that Hume claims this to be true of all reasoning. He starts his discussion of morals with the following statement:

> There is an inconvenience which attends all abstruse reasoning, that it may silence, without convincing an antagonist, and requires the same intense study to make us sensible of its force, that was at first requisite for its invention. When we leave our closet, and engage in the common affairs of life, its conclusions seem to vanish, like the phantoms of the night on the appearance of the morning…. (Hume 2011, B3, PI, SI, 397)

## ORCID

*Mark Davidson* http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0012-4540

## References

Agosta, L. (2014). "A Rumor of Empathy in Hume's Many Uses of Sympathy." In *A Rumor of Empathy: Rewriting Empathy in the Context of Philosophy*, edited by L. Agosta, 9–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Altvater, E. 2009. "The Roots of Neoliberalism." *Socialist Register* 44: 346–353.

Arendt, H. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Baier, A. 2010. *The Cautious Jealous Virtue: Hume on Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Baier, A. C. 2011. *The Pursuits of Philosophy: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of David Hume*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bain-Selbo, E., and A. Dunn. 2019. "Introduction." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 102: v. v–vii.

Birmingham, P. 2019. "Democracy, Populism, and the Production of Superfluousness." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 102 (23): 176–195.

Blackburn, S. 2008. *How to Read Hume*. 1st ed. London: Granta UK.

Brenner, N. 2018. "Debating Planetary Urbanization: For an Engaged Pluralism." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (3): 570–590.

Brenner, N., and N. Theodore. 2002. "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism.'" *Antipode* 34 (3): 349–379.

Brown, W. 2019. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Davidson, M. 2010. "Hacking Away at Sustainability: Science, Ideology and Cynical Blockage." *Human Geography* 3 (2): 83–90.

Davidson, M., and K. Iveson. 2015a. "Beyond City Limits." *City* 19 (5): 646–664.

Davidson, M., and K. Iveson. 2015b. "Recovering the Politics of the City." *Progress in Human Geography* 39 (5): 543–559.

Davidson, M., and D. Martin, eds. 2013. *Urban Politics: Critical Approaches*. 1st ed. London: Sage.

Feyerabend, P., and I. Hacking, eds. 2010. *Against Method*. 4th ed. New York: Verso.

Galston, W. A. 2018. *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*. 1st ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Garrett, A., and S. Sebastiani. 2017. "David Hume on Race." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by N. Zack, 31–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hayek, F. 2007. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F. A. 2011. *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition* (The Collected Works;

edited by R. Hamowy). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hume, D. 2011. *The Essential Philosophical Works*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

Krugman, P. 2017. "The Political Failure of Trickle-Down Economics." *The New York Times*, August 20. https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/the-political-failure-of-trickle-down-economics/.

Laclau, E. 2018. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Latour, B. 1988. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Madden, D. 2019. "Editorial: City of Emergency." *City* 23 (3): 281–284.

Orwell, G. 1972. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. San Diego, CA: Mariner Books.

Orwell, G. 2005. Letter to Humphry House, April 11. In *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Vol. 1: An Age Like This*, 1920-1940. Boston, MA: Nonpareil Books.

Orwell, G., and J. Carey. 2002. *Essays*. New York: Everyman's Library.

Peck, J. 2010. "Zombie Neoliberalism and the Ambidextrous State." *Theoretical Criminology* 14 (1): 104–110.

Peck, J. 2013. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pieterse, J. N. 2019. "What Do People Want?" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 102 (23): 111–127.

Popper, K. 1962. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. Oxford: Routledge.

Rossi, U. 2018. "The Populist Eruption and the Urban Question." *Urban Geography* 39 (9): 1425–1430.

Smith, N. 2008. "Neoliberalism is Dead, Dominant, Defeatable – Then What?" *Human Geography* 1 (2): 1–3.

Stanley, B. 2008. "The Thin Ideology of Populism." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (1): 95–110.

Wyly, E. K., and J. K. Dhillon. 2018. "Planetary Kantsaywhere." *City* 22 (1): 130–151.

**Mark Davidson** is Associate Professor of Geography at Clark University. Email: mdavidson@clarku.edu