

Brexit has been described as "the undefined being negotiated by the unprepared in order to get the unspecified for the uninformed". Such a description surely opens the way for the academic community to provide the empirical evidence that would help policy makers to make the kind of choices the referendum failed to make.

At first sight this might appear to be happening: there has been an outpouring of psephological, legal, political and economic writing about the policy implications of the referendum. And yet in practice the idea of a fruitful overlap between the worlds of academic and practitioner is being severely tested in the highly polarised environment that has emerged in the UK. The request of one MP to all university Vice-Chancellors to provide details of those teaching on Brexit and of the content of their courses reflects a deep suspicion of an academic world that was predominantly in favour of Remain and whose contributions are now regularly perceived by those on the other side as attempts to undermine or reverse the referendum result. As Nigel Farage, the UKIP politician, has put it: "The EU has infiltrated our universities. We must fight back against their propaganda machine".

What choices do academics have in such a difficult environment? Three possible responses can be identified. First, the academic can assume the role of the engaged public intellectual. This is what the political philosopher, A.C.Grayling has done, arguing against the democratic character of the referendum in a very open way, notably in the weekly "New European". Second, the academic can assume the role of an investigator of public preferences. University College London recently organised a Citizens' Assembly designed to establish the kind of trade-offs people are willing to make to get an agreement with the rest of the EU. It was an experiment that interestingly won support on both sides of the argument. Third, the academic can act as a story teller, establishing different narratives of the nature of the European Union to enable people to think about it differently. Such is the nature of the work of Kalyso Nikolaidis at Oxford, developing the idea of European "demoicracy".

None of these approaches guarantees success but in such a contested environment they represent a recognition that the academic should not remain silent or hide behind the empirical to avoid making any kind of judgement. Policy makers for their part have a right to expect from the academic world a choice of futures as they look for different options for society to move forward.

Michael Shackleton  
Special Professor in European Institutions  
University of Maastricht