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DISTINGUISHED ACADEMIC AWARD

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# Truth as a Value and a Practice: A Perpetual Issue in Post- Secondary Education

**GUY ROCHER**

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AWARD ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS

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**Guy Rocher** had a classical education at Collège de l'Assomption (1935–1943). He received his M.A. in sociology from Université Laval in 1950, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1958.

He began his teaching career at Université Laval in 1952. In 1960, the Université de Montréal invited him to become the chair of the sociology department, a position he held for five years (1960–1965). During that time, he also served as vice-dean of social sciences (1962–1967). In 1961 the Government of Quebec appointed him to the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education (Parent Commission), charged with reforming Quebec's education system.

Between 1977 and 1983, Guy Rocher took leave twice from his university career to serve in the Government of Quebec as associate secretary-general to the Cabinet and deputy minister, first for cultural development (1977–1979) and later for social development (1981–1982). In this role, he was active in the development of language policy (White Paper and Charter of the French Language), cultural policy (White Paper on Cultural Development) and scientific research policy (Green Paper).

For more than 25 years, Guy Rocher has been associated with the law faculty's Centre de recherche en droit public, where he has pursued research in the sociology of law, ethics and other means of social regulation. He has published some 20 books, more than 200 scientific articles and book chapters and has presented his ideas at numerous conferences to a wide range of audiences.

He is the recipient of three honorary doctorates: in law from Université Laval (1996); in sociology from the Université de Moncton (1997); and in the social sciences from the Université du Québec à Montréal (2002). His many awards and distinctions include the Government of Quebec's Prix Léon-Gérin (1995), the Canada Council for the Arts' Molson Prize (1997), the Prix Esdras-Minville (1998), awarded by the Saint-Jean Baptiste Society of Montreal, and the Sir John William Dawson Medal (1999), given by the Royal Society of Canada for important contributions of knowledge in multiple domains.

Guy Rocher's work in each of the domains of academic life — teaching, research and service to the institution and the community — has been honoured with a CAUT Distinguished Academic Award. This is a translation of his acceptance speech delivered on April 24, 2009, during CAUT Council events in Ottawa.

# Truth as a Value and a Practice: A Perpetual Issue in Post- Secondary Education

**GUY ROCHER**

IN THE MANY HISTORICAL, legal and other analyses that have been done on Canadian postsecondary educational institutions, almost no one has given any attention to the role played by the various unions and professional associations that represent members of the academic staff. In my experience, however, over a career spanning some 57 years in academic institutions, I have had frequent opportunity to recognize the importance of unions and professional associations. I have belonged to our association, now a union, ever since I started teaching as a young professor in 1952, and I continue to support it actively.

FOR THIS REASON, the honour CAUT is conferring on me by this very special award has a great deal of significance for me. I appreciate immensely that it does not come from some hierarchical authority, some club of deans, principals and presidents, but from my colleagues, represented here today by you, by our Association. I am moved, touched and grateful, and it is in that spirit that I accepted and am here today to receive it. I sincerely thank the colleagues who prepared and put forward my nomination and the members of the Council who awarded it to me, especially Past President Greg Allain.

Receiving this award, which I hold in the highest esteem, led me to reflect on the basic elements of my personal attachment to university teaching and research. I asked myself some questions: Why have I spent my life teaching and conducting research in postsecondary institutions? Why am I still in these same institutions at the age of 85, as if they were my natural habitat? Why am I still concerned with the future of these institutions, when I clearly will not be there at some time in the not-too-distant future?

My answer to these questions appears to me to lie in the following statement: Our life as teachers and researchers at the postsecondary level is shaped and motivated by truth, truth as a value and as a practice. If I try to grasp the

essence of our postsecondary teaching and research institutions and trace the inspiration for our daily activities, it seems that they conceal a basic value that is rarely revealed for itself: the pursuit of and respect for truth, in all its myriad forms. Our colleges and universities are really monuments to the search for truth. The students that we welcome want truth. The entire teaching staff serves the transmission and renewal of truth. We could say that truth is the value that distinguishes, defines and justifies the existence of our colleges and universities. Our postsecondary education institutions do not serve love, justice or equality. Of course, they may try to serve justice and equality, though in fact they do not; but these are not the values that explain the existence of our institutions or motivate our activities and duties in them. It is truth — as a value and as a practice.

Having said this, I am conscious that I do not want to fall into what has now become a very common conversation, in a language, a jargon, that I do not often use. Rather than truth, we generally speak of knowledge and the transfer of knowledge, of our sciences or disciplines. But truth is the fundamental, essential, ontological and epistemological value on which, in the final analysis, everything that we call knowledge, learning, our sciences and disciplines rests. It is much easier to speak of knowledge and understanding than it is to speak of truth. Truth seems abstract, imponderable, even unreal, or perhaps too self-important, or belonging exclusively to the discourse of theology or perhaps philosophy. I am taking a big risk in attempting to address such a theme in a few minutes.

Let's say it right out: truth is complex and therefore disturbing. It has many faces, and is far from simple. First of all, truth isn't eternally true. By this I mean that truth has differed across time and civilizations. For nearly two millennia, until the 19th century, our forebears believed in the Biblical version of creation, the cosmos, the earth and its inhabitants. So truth has its own long and complex history. The 12th century theologian Bernard de Chartres spoke of *Veritas, filia temporis*: "Truth, the daughter of time." A few years ago an American sociologist colleague, Steven Shapin, published a very scholarly work entitled *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England*, an exhaustive study of scientific knowledge in 17th century England and the evolution of the truths it produced. Clearly, it is easier to speak of truths in the plural than truth in the singular.

We could adopt the sociologists' perspective on truth. In the same work, Professor Shapin wrote: "For the sociologist there is no other way to conceive truth save through the study of what people do collectively... In short, truth is a social institution." In other words, sociologically speaking, truth as a value is revealed through and by the tangible behaviours and practical activities that are its expressions. Truth as a value and truths as practices are closely linked. In this way, along with being a universal value, truth is also a social construct, developed in and on the basis of social relations. The result is truths that differ if you belong to a particular religion rather than another, to a particular civi-

lization, social class or economic and cultural stratum, even to a particular science or discipline rather than another. As a sociologist in a law faculty, I can testify that lawyers and legal scholars have truths that sociologists don't share, and vice-versa.

This is consonant with the surprising definition of truth given in the French dictionary *Larousse*: "the correspondence between reality and the person who thinks it." This is not an essentialist definition; it does not refer to ontology, to the essence of truth, and does not define it as an absolute value. This definition focuses on a practical truth; that is, truth as a human being lives it in his or her relations with reality. The definition could just as easily apply to animals. It could be expanded to say that truth is "the correspondence between reality and any living being that thinks it."

This clarifies, I believe, the distinction I make in the title of my speech, between truth as a value and truth as a practice. Truth in itself, ontological truth, truth as a value, the very idea of truth, can be one and universal, whereas truth practically or empirically lived is plural, relative and constructed. Colleges and universities symbolize truth; academic staff produces, transmits and disseminates truths in the form of knowledge that is specific and experimentally verified or in the process of being verified, whether in the realm of nature in the natural and physical sciences, or the realms of thought in philosophy, aesthetics in the arts or human relations in the human and social sciences.

The greatness of the mission of our colleges and universities lies in the pursuit of truth and of truths in all their forms, and the respect for truth. In today's society as in times past, colleges and universities are the tangible, living representatives of respect for intelligence and truth. It is their responsibility, and ours, to fulfill this role, defend it, preserve it and assert it.

Needless to say, this mission, which is our institutions' and our own, is not practiced in a void. It is lived in particular historical contexts, each with its political, economic, cultural, social and ideological components, which have exerted, exert and will continue to exert pressures on the institutions and the personnel that are the bearers of knowledge. Our postsecondary institutions and professions exist in the midst of power relationships, conflicts of interest and conflicts of values. Some contexts are more favourable to the postsecondary institutions and staff's mission; others, more problematical. Some political and ideological contexts can even make victims or heroes of academic staff. There are still countries and civilizations where the attitude is "Some truths should not be spoken."

In such contexts our mission of truth has some powerful enemies. The first, the most insidious and pernicious, is the utilitarian attitude to truth. This attitude is all the more pernicious because it contains an element of truth. Knowledge has an undeniable social and economic utility. Economic because it is the source of economic developments beneficial to the entire population; social because knowledge creates enlightened, active and involved citizens, especially in a democratic society.

But at the same time there is a considerable temptation for the wielders of political and economic power to use knowledge for their own ends and exploit it for their own interests. This almost natural utilitarian tendency on the part of the powerful poses the constant threat that truth will be co-opted, derailed or gagged.

Political and economic powers can be the guardians and protectors of academic freedom or its enemies. Patrons have been many and are valuable as long as they do not try to enlist truth to promote their own interests, ideologies or convictions.

The hijacking of institutions of higher knowledge and research by the powerful has a long history. From their beginnings in the 12th and 13th centuries, universities were pawns in the power struggles between popes and bishops, between bishops and princes, among different princes and between the religious establishment and the mendicant orders of friars. The knowledge possessed by our predecessors in those days was a source of political, ecclesiastic and ideological power. Against this backdrop, they claimed and defended the autonomy of their universities and their freedom to think and teach truths as they understood them at that time.

Today's economic and political powers are not those of the Middle Ages but their interests are not dissimilar, and the issue of academic freedom is as alive today as it was then. Over the centuries, we have shared our predecessors' responsibilities for safeguarding the culture of truth that is the hallmark, the essence of our colleges and universities.

We live at a time when knowledge is valued by those with power perhaps more than at any other. But this valuation itself poses a risk to truth and truths. Today's knowledge economy values learning and knowledge but at the same time conscripts them in the service of political and economic objectives that may be all the more deleterious just because they are reasonable and defensible.

Knowledge has become a powerful lever for individual and collective enrichment and well-being, whether in prosperity or in an economic crisis like the current one. Knowledge is an instrument of superiority in industrial and economic competition between nations and in competition on national and international markets.

Such situations demand of our institutions, and of ourselves as academic staff, the ability to resist all utilitarian attempts by power interests to take over or hijack knowledge.

However, it must be acknowledged that professors and researchers themselves have interests and convictions that are not always favourable to the pursuit of truth. Researchers' interests may be many and various: financial, institutional, professional. And their interests may combine with those of the political and economic powers-that-be. Medical research is the most flagrant modern example of the convergence of researchers' financial and professional interests with the financial interests of the pharmaceutical industry. Many recent books and articles, especially in the United States, have denounced very

disturbing conflicts of interest among professors and researchers in the medical faculties of big universities, to the point where a large part of the research prior to the marketing of drugs and medical techniques can no longer be considered reliable.

Even as trusted and prestigious a journal as the *New England Journal of Medicine* has seen its objectivity challenged. Dr Marcia Angell, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, was the editor of the journal for nearly 20 years. She recently wrote: "It is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research that is published ... I take no pleasure in this conclusion, which I reached slowly and reluctantly over my two decades as an editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*." This is a very serious statement from an authoritative source. Powerful financial and professional interests are combining to obstruct truth, thereby putting individual and public health at risk.

Professors and researchers who have been and are the victims of various power interests when they attempt to defend truth in their teaching or research often need the support of their institution, their colleagues and perhaps above all their professional association or union. CAUT has come to the defence of men and women at our colleges and universities who have risked being penalized, often very seriously, for having spoken particular truths that the powers involved did not want to recognize or make known. The most obvious case, certainly the most publicized, is that of Professor Nancy Olivieri at the University of Toronto, but it is far from being the only one, and health is not the only field where it happens. Defending the victims of truth is one of CAUT's most important missions, one that it has taken up with courage and generosity. We have good reason to be proud of it.

In so doing, CAUT contributes to promoting what I call the ethics of truth, or, perhaps more precisely, our ethical relationship with truth in all its forms. This ethical relationship with truth is the foundation and the reason for the academic freedom we lay claim to, freedom in teaching and research and the autonomy of our colleges and universities themselves. In the name of truth, we defend intellectual freedom to all funding agencies, public and private. Whether it is public or private, the funding granted to postsecondary teaching and research should never constrain truth. Unfortunately, we all know that this does not always happen. Donor agencies are generally much more interested in the results of our work and the advantages to be gained from it than in the triumph of truth.

Among the several challenges the future poses to the defence of truth, those linked to technological development are particularly obvious. This will undoubtedly continue to be the case in medical research, as I mentioned just now. As well, the explosive growth of information and communication technologies will present new problems. I will mention two that concern me. First, survey firms typify our contemporary societies and serve many purposes, political and commercial, as well as research. Survey firms use the telephone to contact

their interview samples. But a growing number of people are disconnecting their home landlines in favour of cell phones. In France this trend has been observed particularly among the working class and the poor. The result is that “representative” samples are more and more skewed towards the well-to-do and consequently more conservative. If this trend continues, the validity of opinion surveys will be increasingly jeopardized. Already in France, they are suspected of being a propaganda weapon for conservative political opinion and the status quo.

Second, I believe that the Internet will become one of the great technological challenges to the future of truth and truths. Opinion is divided on the promises it offers and the threats it presents. Many praise the advantages it provides in terms of the incredible expansion of knowledge sources and of exchange and discussion forums. Others are already condemning the resulting cultural fragmentation and the possibility that more information does not necessarily mean more reliable information and may even undermine the authority of teachers and other experts. In other words, we may well wonder whether truth will be better served by the Internet or led astray. I was very disturbed by Andrew Keen’s critique of what he called “the cult of the amateur,” in a work recently translated into French by a Quebec publisher.

If, in conclusion, I return to the personal musings I shared with you at the beginning of my talk, I think I can say that it was precisely this sense of the challenge of truth that led me to go into teaching and research, that is the reason I am still here and that concerns me for the future. Taking the responsibility and the risks that truth entails has been, is and always will be the essential role of our colleges and universities and of all the employees who are their body and soul. It is not that I have taken any greater responsibility than others have, nor have I had to suffer as much as some in the promotion and defence of truth. Perhaps this is what enables me to speak about it today without being driven by bitterness or anger.

I do want to say, however, that the authorities and managers of our academic institutions are not always the best promoters and defenders of their academic staffs. It is one of the missions — I would venture to say, perhaps the main mission — of our associations and unions to protect independence and freedom in research and teaching and our right to free involvement in our society. Our associations and unions have a duty of truth for all the truths that we teach and research. They have often proved that they have shouldered this responsibility. That is why I place my complete confidence in them and wish them a long life!





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