

Occasional Address, La Trobe Graduation, Dec 16, 2015

David G Legge

Deputy Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Graduands:

I start by expressing my appreciation of the Aboriginal custodians of this land, in particular the Wurundjeri people of this region but also the other nations and clans who host La Trobe's regional campuses. Australia's Indigenous peoples have lived in a sustainable relationship with the land for tens of thousands of years but this vision of sustainability is now very much at risk, immediately through global warming, but more fundamentally through the culture of greed and selfishness which drives global capitalism.

Dear Graduands,

First, my congratulations for making it this far. Today is a special moment in your lives; it marks an ending and points toward new beginnings and new possibilities. It is a time for reflection on the meaning of your academic achievement and a time for reflecting of the principles and values which will guide you in your next phase.

At this time of reflection I would like to tell you a story about a man who has long served as an inspiration for me. His name is Rudolf Virchow.

Rudolf Virchow lived in Germany from 1821 to 1902. He initially studied theology and at the age of 18 he completed his theological studies with a thesis entitled, *"A Life Full of Work and Toil is not a Burden but a Benediction"*.

From theology he turned to medicine and graduated as a doctor in 1843 at the age of 22. He became a pathologist and from 1846 commenced a research career that was studded with observations and reports that are still recognised among the fundamental building blocks of modern medicine.

In 1847, still only 26, he was commissioned to report on an epidemic of what was called 'hunger-typhus' in Upper Silesia, now part of Poland. Essentially it was a famine combined with epidemic typhus. Virchow documented the appalling death rates and described in detail the hunger, disease and death. However, he located his descriptions of death and disease clearly in the context of the poverty, oppression, official neglect and community depression.

Virchow was critical of the German bureaucrats who had neglected the needs of the people of Upper Silesia: *"It is the curse of humanity that it learns to tolerate even the most horrible situations by habituation, that it forgets the most shameful happenings in the daily shape of events..."*

"The educated people in those districts and with them the authorities ... became so dulled by the daily sight of this sunken nation, they became so indifferent in regard to their sufferings that, when at last help had been promised and tendered from all sides there arose a general complaint that the people would be spoiled. When those who had nothing,

absolutely nothing, to eat, were allotted one pound of flour daily, it was feared that they would be spoiled!"

He was likewise critical of the Church saying. *"It lies in the interests of the mother church to keep the people bigoted, stupid and dependent."*

Virchow related the famine, poverty and disease to the prevailing economic circumstances and relations. He described in detail the living conditions of the affected communities, living in small, crowded, earthen floored shacks, which in many cases they shared with their cow.

He spoke passionately about the oppressive employment conditions of the bonded labour system: *"These unfortunate people had to render compulsory service to the landlord proprietors as house servants for 5-6 days a week and there barely remained one day in which they could take care of their small field and their family."*

He went on: *"What else was more natural than that the work for the landlords, which brought in nothing, was done carelessly, and that energetic activity could be inspired only by special incitements. Such a stimulation was furnished in particular by the brandy to which they were passionately devoted, and which was a source of oblivion and of momentary joyous elevation."*

He demonstrated that there were options for economic development which could help to bring the Upper Silesians out of poverty but the government authorities had done nothing.

Virchow concluded that the fundamental need was for *"full and unlimited democracy"*. He asked *"who else but the people themselves could help the people to obtain their written and unwritten rights?"*

Virchow returned to Berlin in March 1848 just in time to participate in the revolution of 1848 in Prussia. This was one of a number of revolutions across Germany during 1848-49. The main demands of the protestors in Berlin were to do with democratic elections, freedom of the press and a constitution. Some 250 people were killed before the King and his counsellors acceded to the revolutionaries' demands for reform. A new constitution was adopted and a new legislature established. Virchow was active in the Radical Party and was elected to the new parliament in 1862 (aged 41).

Virchow has been a reference point, an inspiration for public health practitioners for more than a century. His recognition of the ways in which famine and disease are shaped by social and economic relations and his commitment to *"full and unlimited democracy"* as an appropriate response, has resonated with public health activists facing comparable situations since then. In particular he is remembered for saying,

"Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale."

He went on to say:

"Medicine, as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution: the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution... The physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and the social problems should largely be solved by them."

Virchow has been an inspiration to public health advocates around the world. Salvador Allende, the President of Chile who was assassinated by a CIA supported military coup in 1973, was a medical doctor and a prominent modern disciple of Virchow.

My own involvement in revolutionary politics, also inspired in part by Virchow, has been less dramatic. As a young medico in the late 1970s I was active in an organisation called BUGA UP, standing for Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Products. Our main target was cigarette advertising and we used to reface cigarette advertisements either with paint bombs or targeted revisions of the text. Today I work with an international network of health activists, the People's Health Movement, which aims to build a global movement to reverse the conditions which drive global health inequalities.

The need to remember Virchow and Allende has never been greater. The corporate juggernaut which is driving economic globalisation is taking humanity to the brink of disaster. We are facing a global crisis of widening inequality and an ominous destabilisation of the human environment.

As Virchow said: *"It is the curse of humanity that it learns to tolerate even the most horrible situations by habituation, that it forgets the most shameful happenings in the daily shape of events..."*.

The fact that 750 million people go to bed hungry today is one such 'horrible situation', 'a most shameful happening'. In part our acceptance of 'horrible situations' reflects a loss of faith in the Enlightenment promise of rational politics and technological solutions to economic problems. Instead we see a rising individualistic materialism accompanied by existential insecurity and political alienation.

The global crisis is complex but an important driver of the crisis is the determination of the transnational capitalist class to preserve its privileges, even if this means propping up a global economic regime which is unfair, unstable and fundamentally unsustainable.

Globally the transnational capitalist class has a high level of shared self-consciousness; it is well organised and has rich channels of communication. In contrast, it confronts a dispersed cacophony of national working classes and middle classes (divided by language, gender, ethnicity and race) and the excluded and marginal classes who have been found to be 'surplus to requirements' in a globalising economy.

We need to build awareness and solidarity across all of these dispersed classes, genders and ethnicities if we are to effectively confront the transnational capitalist class and arrest the rise of neoliberalism and the progress of economic globalisation.

Dear Graduands,

I think Virchow has a few useful messages for you at this point of reflection and review.

One message is about managing the boundaries between your role as a technically qualified professional and your role as a citizen. Virchow would implore you not to lose your horror at the injustices and avoidable suffering with which we are surrounded.

Virchow would urge that you not be demoralised by the complexities and obstacles which stand in the way of a sustainable, enjoyable and equitable world. Rather he would suggest

that you to apply the learning skills and critical thinking which have brought you to this graduation, to find new policies, new ways of communicating and organising that can arrest the juggernaut of economic globalisation and put us on a path to equity and sustainability.

This university has an enviable tradition of political engagement and radical critique and you can choose to carry this tradition forward into the next stage of your career. I commend to you the case of Rudolf Virchow as an example which could guide you in doing so.