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‘Of Bigots and Voters’

Rodanthi Tzanelli, Public Sociology, 30 April 2010

Independent, Thursday 29th April.

There is nothing more entertaining than watching pre-election campaigns and the cock-fighting that accompanies them: every side rushes to make last-minute amends to its programme and assure its followers that they misunderstood what they heard in the news, read in newspapers or listened in a public speech. Marginal places and anonymous folk, often forgotten in the aftermath of a victory, have the opportunity to become stars for a day, shake the hand of famous politicians and tell their own story in front of the lens. But whereas the pre-election media campaign temporarily democratises participation, opening the once exclusive political domain to the masses, it has also encouraged the abuse of open speech by those who would gladly cause unnecessary havoc to consolidate their social presence. This is the reason why I am not sure how to respond to the recent controversy generated after Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s comment on his encounter with pensioner Gillian Duffy. There are at least three ways one could approach the incident – consequently, at least three different interpretations one could present. Though I will attempt to unpack these points of view, I am aware that I may add my own understanding of the incident to an already congested debate. Mr Brown’s unfortunate remarks have already attracted much speculation in the media – in fact, as much as Mrs Duffy’s reaction when she discovered what the Prime Minister had said ‘behind her back’. As a result, another layer of interpretations of Mr Brown’s comments was added by the media when journalists chose to disclose his private conversation to Mrs Duffy and debate his outburst from a psychological point of view. Looking at the controversy from all these angles, I suspect that the overall ‘Duffy drama’ can reveal more about the state of British society and politics and nothing certain about the truthfulness or accuracy of comments on Mr Brown’s undoubtedly unfortunate remarks. This state is defined by something I spent over a decade investigating as a historian, a criminologist and a sociologist in relation to a country (Greece) that chronic economic mismanagement as well as foreign political interference eventually transformed into a European pariah: the socio-cultural dimensions of individual and collective struggles for equality, respect and dignity. Aleksei Balabanov’s quirky film *Of Freaks and Men* (1998) satirises the mores of a declining Russian bourgeoisie that the new porn industry entrepreneurs strip off its clothes and shame in front of the lens. Likewise, the modern newsreading industry’s revelations about Mr Brown’s comments successfully target the dignity of a ‘fallen Prime Minister’ (who first attempted to do the same to one of his devoted voters in private).

New Labour is at a dangerous crossroads: being forced by former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s overseas policy to retrieve the lost support of its voters and of the fragmented British ‘nation’, it has now departed on an even more damaging immigration policy that spills its poison into the educational sector with the recently introduced points system. A country renowned for its cultural mobility, Britain now has to forfeit a great chunk of its economic income because of this system that discourages some potentially productive future members of its demoralised academic community from visiting the country because of immigration scrutiny. Brown promises to make amends now, but he also seems to repeat some of the old mantras that brought New Labour to its current deadlock: aside from the commercialisation of education that already excludes from the acquisition of

professional qualifications and academic degrees the very people the party promised to support, the allusion to community safety and punishment rings the alarm of intensified surveillance. The control of immigration and that of bad native characters through ASBOS and 'broken window' repairs, now co-exist in a perfect symmetry. Though in the Ministerial Debate Mr Brown made some very valid points regarding the preservation of community safety, the persistence of those themes reveals that New Labour's moral project is to civilise both foreign newcomers and its home-grown underclass alike – a mission one would naturally attribute to Mr David Cameron's side instead.

Having worked for three years in an (further-come-higher education) institution that aspired to realise New Labour's radical step towards civilising the dispossessed working classes, I can argue from experience that the whole system has turned such educational institutions into asylums. In those three years I watched gifted but penniless students struggling to find financial means, time and emotional energy to finish their degree sometimes to no avail, ungifted students wasting my time and that of their peers, further education colleagues becoming confused about the new demands and requirements and growing resentful towards their younger promising colleagues, but also myself losing my health due to lack of proper professional support and infrastructural provision. Whereas I liked some of my students, I knew I had applied for a different job from the one I was given and that I was not trained to respond to the needs of the institution. Hence, even from a pedagogue's perspective things are not looking good: the educational system New Labour set up promoted a great vision which spoke to my heart but muddled my brain and ruined my body. External assessments of the research performance of the school in which I worked dictated a greedy approach that involved hiring research-productive academics but matched them with experienced further-education teachers. As New Labour had to work with a bureaucratic state machine that could not be instantly replaced, rushing to implement a system that demanded careful planning, professional redefinitions and local structural re-organisation resulted in the loss of political support from those that the party had to keep on its side: the academics. As the emotional, economic and political damages of this last decade's policies cannot be rectified instantly, I do understand Duffy's disgruntlement. The Prime Minister has been accused before of sexism in his workplace, but as media commentary always constructs its stories to create public sensation, his reaction to Mrs Duffy may of course also be the result of pre-election exhaustion. This however does not detract from the fact that the feminisation of complaint is the marker of those condemned to remain trapped in the private sphere of a national community, enjoying the second-class privileges of social citizenship: the women. Mr Brown's encounter with Mrs Duffy is a clash of worlds divided along gender and class lines.

At the same time, however, the pensioner's televised demands bear the stamp of the very conservatism she claims to oppose by her vote. Her appeal to the world of her youth, when children used to be taught to value 'education, health service and looking after people who are vulnerable' resorts to this sort of nostalgia that conservative communitarians use now in their political campaigning. In a surprising reversal then, Mr Brown's unfairly revealed secret comment supports an inclusive multicultural agenda, whereas Mrs Duffy's discourse obstinately opposes it. In her own recorded words 'there's too many people now who aren't vulnerable and they can claim (benefits) – and people who are vulnerable and can't claim [...] You can't

say anything about the immigrants – all these Eastern Europeans who are coming in where are they're flocking from?' From Europe (of course) with which Britain trades and from which it supplements its labour power. Mrs Brown was quick to point out that such human mobilities are unilateral and reciprocal, with many British professionals working in other European countries. Interestingly, Mrs Duffy's unsavoury comments on immigration policy were followed by those on New Labour's 'scrapping' of financial support of 'our students' who go to the University. 'I'm thinking about my grandchildren now – what will they have to pay to get into the University?' As a University lecturer I understand Mrs Duffy's outburst, but can assure her that those (European and overseas) students who have to pay ten times more to come to study in this country contribute to Britain's economy more than her grandchildren. Without this cultural mobility, Britain goes nowhere in the world – no matter how many supplications one makes to an imagined pure British past that probably never existed. Britain became a global player thanks to its global trade in slaves and products manufactured by the distant ancestors of those students Mrs Duffy considers unworthy of state support because they are foreign or of a different colour. Mr Brown's manoeuvring in the Ministerial Debate supported her ethno-national argument in so far as it promised more jobs for British young people, but as we have just entered the last week of pre-election campaign this may also be understood as the Prime Minister's last attempt to ameliorate tensions in the electorate mass before voters shift right.

In all fairness one also has to criticise those who grasped the opportunity to publicise Mr Brown's private comment on the eve of a national election. Given that they are the defenders of open democratic dialogue and supporters of 'free speech' and the right to privacy, their act may fuel a rather cheap political propaganda against the Prime Minister's public image, encouraging last-minute manipulation of votes. In the country I came from (Greece), these used to be the tactics of totalitarian regimes that destroyed internal solidarities, brewed extremist attitudes and eventually brought about the country's demise in the global arena in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The same strategies still inform – primarily but not exclusively – populist politics while also characterising Greece's informal political economy of vote-bargaining at large. Having spent a good few years studying hard to get myself out of this social milieu, I feel doubly cheated to encounter the same problems in one of the most 'civilised' corners of the West. Just like Mrs Duffy, my former compatriots constantly complain about the dirty games of *apateōnes* (απατεώνες), a word they use to describe politicians engaged in scandalous party transactions.

The Greek idea of appearances is of religious origins but in modern political parlance is used to debate the deceptive practice of self-presentation adopted by those who operate like confidence men. Mr Brown's hasty conclusion that his voter is a bigot (e.g. someone who lives 'by God', if we retrieve the etymology of the word) could easily be attributed to his own profession too. Religious devotion is rejected by rationalists for good reasons (e.g. it brews fundamentalist outlooks and insularity), but its sole attribution to a working-class woman may also be unfair. In effect, Mrs Duffy's and Mrs Brown's criticism mirror each other: whereas the former calls her revered Prime Minister an illusionist who did not deliver on what he promised, he reciprocated by pointing out how she buys in to this game of trickery (living 'by God's' illusions). In Greece the illusionist skills (what *apateōniés* literally means) of treacherous politicians extend to the practice of smearing people's reputations in

public and through media 'revelations'. Exposing people's intimate conversations leads to their symbolic feminisation in the eyes of the public – a comment implicitly made in a recent psychological profiling of Mr Brown's reaction to Mrs Duffy's question. Though the article adopts a rather individualised approach to the incident, a sociological correction might make such observations more accurate: as the Prime Minister's public humiliation rubs off on the party he leads as a whole, the danger of New Labour appearing to go back on its promise to support the working classes deprives its political programme of any consistency. Exhaustion plays a vital role in such gaffes, generating windows of opportunity for some media illusionists too to tarnish collective party reputations. The diffusion of bigotry knows no national borders or professions, it seems.

*Posted in **sociology**.*