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Ben Gidley “Speaking of the Working Class”

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Submitted version

Not quite citizenship and working class voice

Citizenship is inextricably bound up with voice, with the act of speech and the act of listening. At the edges of accounts of the Athenian polis and of the Roman republic, we can faintly hear the clamour of the demos, those with no voice and have not counted, insisting on being heard. In the Roman republic, the proletariat were those who were heard last, if at all, in the assembly; it was property that gave weight to voice, that made a voice count, and the proletarians were counted in the census only by their number of offspring (*proli*) instead of their property.

For Aristotle, while all animals have voice, only humans have speech. Discussing a tale told by Livy of the Roman plebs on Aventine Hill, as retold by Pierre-Simon Ballanche in 1829, Jacques Rancière talks of the plebs claiming the human faculty of speech. “They [the plebs] do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of logos – meaning, symbolic enrolment in the city. Plebs live a purely individual life that passes on nothing to posterity except for life itself, reduced to its reproductive function. Whoever is nameless cannot speak.” Just as Plato called the demos a “large and powerful animal”, the Roman patricians heard the sounds of the plebs as – in Ballanche’s words – “only transitory speech, a speech that is a fugitive *sound*, a sort of lowing, a sign of want”: a voice that did not count, that held no meaning to them.

In today’s modes of citizenship, not all voices are heard as speech, as carrying the weight of meaning in the community of value. As Nancy Fraser has written, the speech of citizens is circumscribed by:

the officially recognized vocabulary in which one can press claims; the idioms available for interpreting and communicating one’s needs; the established narrative conventions available for constructing the individual and collective histories which are constitutive of social identities; the paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative in adjudicating conflicting claims; the ways in which various discourses constitute their respective subject matters as specific sorts of objects; the repertory of available rhetorical devices; the bodily and gestural dimensions of speech which are associated in a given society with authority and conviction (Fraser 1986:425).

Without the weight of such authority, the voice of the working class is rendered in the space of citizenship through the speech of others; the working class is seen but not heard. In the nineteenth century, the classing gaze of sociology emerged, as urban explorers ventured amongst into the exotic tribes of the proletarian underworld to account for the dangerous classes (Gidley 2000, Rooke and Gidley 2010). These urban explorers, such as Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb, developed a scopic taxonomy for this accounting work, parallel to the anthropological taxonomies of tribes developed by colonial ethnographers in the same period. Booth posited eight classes, with the bottom two (“the lowest class” and the “causal poor”, the latter forming “a leisure class amongst the poor”) forming a “residuum”, sharply separated from the respectable and “regular” working poor (Gidley 2000).

This taxonomy evolved via the seven classes of Goldthorpe’s Nuffield schema in the 1970s into “official” UK seven class schema in National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), used for most quantitative class analysis today, and has been more recently radically refigured by the

“Great British Class Survey”, a seven class schema which separates an emergent “precariat” from the “traditional working class” (Savage et al 2013).

Today, as Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor have written, the working class enters our political debates – especially debates on migration – as either the *feral chavs* or the *beleaguered natives*. While the former, a new residuum, are figures of derision, the latter, the new respectable poor, are in danger of extinction and in need of protection. In the trope of the feral chav, the working class is racialised as other (Gidley and Rooke 2010). In the trope of the beleaguered native, it also morphs from a social category to an ethnic one: “the *white* working class”.

To what extent does the working class need defending? Can it speak for itself? In a footnote in his chapter, Ben Rogaly, quoting Riley and Harvey, acknowledges that oral histories are ‘partial, subjective, reflexive, ambiguous [and] sometimes contradictory’. But his work with Becky Taylor and Kaveri Qureshi in Peterborough and in three housing estates in Norwich seeks a strategy that runs against the grain of the ventriloquism of current debates on the white working class. Developing oral histories and life stories is the attempt to transform voice into speech, the zoological life botanised by the urban explorers into biographical life. As Kristeva writes, specifically human life is “always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography... Thus the telling of one’s life is, in the end, the essential act for giving it meaning” (2000:49).

Arguably, such a task is a never-ending, impossible one; to move from the private troubles signified by such tellings and the public issues that count in citizenship’s community of value is harder still. As Bourdieu noted (1999:3), ‘difficult’ housing estates are first of all ‘difficult to describe and think about’. How can we tell a story that does justice to the multiplicity and incommensurability of co-existing points of view?.

Precarious Lives

One of the ways in Rogaly uses the private troubles narrated in the life story interviews is in Tom Slater’s notion of the “broken state”: contrary to dominant representations of housing estates and the white working class as constituting a “broken society”, dependant on the state, Rogaly shows precarious structures of self-help and mutual aid surviving in the face of the withdrawal of the social safety net provided by the social democratic state. In Insa Koch’s ethnography in an East Oxford housing estate (2014), she similarly describes the rolling back of the post-war social state narrated locally as a form of state betrayal, taken personally, and with very personal impacts on people’s lives.

These accounts resonate with those found in life history interviewing work I have done in social housing estates in South London. In a life story project in Camberwell (Gidley et al 2006), residents narrated the (gendered) kinship and neighbour networks woven into the housing estate, which shaped the estate as its own space of value, enacting an ethics of care sustaining residents through extreme poverty: reciprocal childcare, financial support, providing accommodation, emotional support, and care for those with health problems, as well partaking in a broader informal economy of quotidian favours.

However, in the accounts, the obligations of reciprocity in this moral economy would, as in the stories Rogaly relates, sometimes deplete residents’ resources so much that fulfilling them can hasten someone going under. One interviewee in this project said:

For example, a cousin could send you a wedding budget. You know, they’re getting married and so you have to contribute to their wedding. Or maybe, yeah, a wedding budget, graduation party, or maybe someone is ill... Or maybe if we lose a relative, we definitely have to send something to contribute to the burial arrangements.

Another interviewee described being “zapped” by meeting these sorts of obligations. Care needs can be very immediate; they cannot be put off. Acts of care paradoxically thwart attempts at developing life strategies to move out of poverty, as with one interviewee who left a childcare training course first because of providing childcare and then a second time to care for her mother who had been taken ill. Providing care without a safety net of one’s own can be a zero sum equation: the support received by the one cared for is cancelled out by the negative impact on the one who gives the care.

Both Ben Rogaly and Linda McDowell in her comments here refer to Guy Standing’s concept of the *precariat*, a new class emerging from the common interest of those from different class locations experiencing shared labour market insecurity – a category which also found its way into the seven new classes of the “Great British Class Survey” (Savage et al 2013). It is a concept which offers hope of solidarity between casualised “middle class” white collar workers and exploited working class people. But the differential class locations from which the precariat is drawn create radically differential access to the sorts of resources that enable people experiencing the sharp edge of austerity to stop from going under, from being “zapped”, suggesting that talk of the precariat as an emergent class might be misplaced.

Spatial injustice and class contempt

The cartography of class contempt that Rogaly also relates in his accounts – the geography of relegation that fixes council estates as dangerous and deviant – is another reality that confounds the promise of solidarity encoded in the concept of the precariat. Elsewhere, with Alison Rooke, I have written of how racialising tropes of working class incivility, sexual immorality, bodily excess, excessive decoration and disordered space are inscribed in Britain’s council estates and especially in particular place-names (Gidley and Rooke 2008).

The spatial imaginary that led Booth to colour-code London’s streets according to his classed schema endures today in indices of deprivation and in moral discourses of ‘sink estates’, in popular books about ‘chav towns’, in the attitudes of public officials to service users with the wrong post codes, and in newspaper descriptions of working class areas.

This geography of relegation produces material disadvantages as council housing is increasingly rationed and residualised, and it produces particular affects which gave shape to the stories people tell about their lives. One tabloid newspaper described the estate-dominated working class and predominantly white South London area of Bermondsey in the following terms:

This was the gutter that Jade dragged herself from. It was here that Jade Cerisa Lorraine Goody on June 5, 1981, was born into a life of poverty and deprivation. Where she spent her early years with a mother with drug problems and a junkie jailbird father who hid guns under her cot (*News of the World*, April 5, 2009).

The shame provoked by this kind of contempt can ground political mobilisation. Most obviously, it can ground a reactionary politics of resentment, feeding the far right – what Les Back (200) calls a “brummagem multiculturalism”, expressed in the demand for rights for whites. But it can also take more positive forms, as when local market traders physically expelled the British National Party (BNP) from Bermondsey as outsiders with no right to claim the area. And occasionally it can take more radical forms, as with the Independent Working Class Association elected to the city council from the estate where Koch’s ethnography was set.

Indigeneity

The working class figured as the new residuum, chav scum, is a bad or failed citizen, dependant on and draining away the welfare state – but it is figured as the respectable white working class it becomes symbolically central to the space of citizenship. The same place-names – such as Eltham and Bermondsey – often appear, but now evoking condescension rather than contempt.

For example, David Goodhart, responding to the 2012 Stephen Lawrence murder verdict, claimed that “there were certain places, like the working class suburbs of south London... where the liberal tolerance of metropolitan Britain was not embraced. That is probably still true today” (2012). Goodhart defends these “certain places” from what he calls “minority-friendly elite liberalism” and “middle class liberals”, who have foisted multiculturalism on their beleaguered natives. Despite this, ethnographic accounts of such spaces (e.g. McKenzie 2012, Jenson and Gidley forthcoming) reveal that beneath the pundits’ radars, the densely woven tapestry of reciprocity characterising working class community have stretched to encompass non-white residents too, and everyday casual interethnic intimacy belies the rhetoric of resentment.

In the discourse of the beleaguered native, the white tribe is figured in terms of its autochthony. In the nadir of this discourse, during his 2009 appearance on the BBC’s *Question Time* the BNP’s Nick Griffin compared indigenous Britons to the Maori of New Zealand or the Native American Sioux Indians. It has been in the name of this indigenous tribe that a toxic anti-immigrant politics has been mainstreamed, from Gordon Brown’s “British jobs for British workers” to Conservative immigration minister James Brokenshire’s claim that “a wealthy metropolitan elite” of “middle class” households have benefited from immigration while “ordinary, hard-working people” have suffered (Barrett 2014).

While symbolically central to the migration debate, white working class – or any working class – voices are generally absent from it. They remain not quite citizens, spoken for by members of the real metropolitan elite. Careful listening, attending to working class speech itself, as Rogaly’s work shows, can start to change the terms of the debate.

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