

Performance, democracy and deficit culture

Victor Merriman, Professor of Critical Performance Studies at Edge Hill University, Lancashire established the Performance and Civic Futures Research Group in 2013, so as to contest Britain's disabling deficit culture, and investigate democratic alternatives to austerity. His ongoing work is concerned with drama, democracy-building, and a political economy of human flourishing



Democracy, like Freedom, Hope, and Happiness, is a big idea. Even where Democracy is not a lived reality, it promises a humane society, and, where it does exist, however imperfectly, it is an ethical gesture toward a just society. In recent decades, however, Democracy has been displaced as an ideal form of social organisation by the Market, which is radically unconcerned with social justice. For a market society to function as a just society, it must be regulated by robust democratic institutions which "empower community-wide standards in all aspects of public life and policy, operating on the basis of a system of popular influence that constrains the discretion of government, denies the majority the right to impose on any enduring minority, and contains the power of various elites to exploit or usurp government power in the service of their private interests." (1)

Freedom is not a negative - laissez faire - but a social condition of being protected by democracy

to participate in public life. "The republican ideal of the free person or citizen requires that you enjoy non-domination in such a range of choices and on the basis of such public protection and resourcing that you can stand on a par with others." (2)

And democratic freedom's inseparable twin is justice, by means of which, "problems of dominium or private power are eradicated [and] problems of imperium or public power are removed." (3)

Against those criteria is difficult to argue that Austerity Britain is a functioning democratic society because "our rights are no longer secured by our collective power as voters, but are subject to the logic of the financial market. Voters can change governments, yet it is nearly impossible for them to change economic policies." (4) This is the crisis of Western, liberal democracy.

The public institutions embodying the post-1945 Welfare State included the National Health Service, Royal Mail, British Steel, British Airways, British Aerospace, British Telecom, British Gas, National Coal Board, British Rail, as pillars of social democratic political economy. Of these institutions, state-funded and directed by public servants toward the common good, only the NHS remains, hollowed out and demoralised, not only by lack of money, but by the dilution of public accountability by a culture of managerialism and marketisation. Elite tolerance of social democratic values of the Welfare State lasted only thirty years, until the election to the leadership of the Conservative Party of Margaret Thatcher in 1975. Since 1975, and especially in the years 1979-1997, the Welfare State has been subjected to intense 'market' pressures, and is now, in any meaningful sense, finished. In cataloguing the sudden destruction caused by her governments' interventions, it is easy to overlook Thatcher's real interest – altering how people imagined, and lived, their lives.

"I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul." (5)

Neoliberalism's value system is personal, private, and individualistic, framing all human interactions as transactions in which each party competes with the other, to secure personal advantage. One of the features of this social regime is the narrowness of its scope - 'me' - and the shortness of its social imagination - restricted to perceived self-interest as deals are struck. Short-termism is a defining feature of British commercial thinking - causing cyclical problems and crises - but, since 1979, it has been imposed upon public institutions and

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the services they provide, breaking Britain in the process.

Cultural work, formerly funded to sustainable levels, is now a micro-managed disaster area, in which bloated bureaucracies are overwhelmingly staffed by administrators, PR and marketing workers. Artists are pushed from pillar to post to satisfy demands wholly incompatible with making art.

Yet, here lies one of Austerity's principal paradoxes – it could not have achieved its success as a shaper of reality and degrader of dreams without a persuasive cultural strategy. State moulding of Deficit Culture was intensified by a 'symbolic shift when the chief whips were kicked out of Downing Street and replaced by a PR machine – government becoming an exercise in public relations rather than a search for truths and solutions.' (6) The playwright, James Graham recorded a shift toward 'politics as a performance' (7), as the 'PR machine' began generating social dramas in which a beleaguered national state confronted multiple adversaries. In these scenarios, the state's longstanding protective responsibilities were 'downsized' and projected as a set of duties to a fictional figure: the Taxpayer (T). Mrs Thatcher's TINA – There Is No Alternative – is T's consort, co-star in a long-running, crisis-driven soap opera, UK plc, which plays out daily in hysterical full-page tabloid headlines recycled in broadcast media and cited in official statements. T is horrified by actual human diversity: variety of aspiration, ethnicity, experience, gender, history, and social class must be shouted down by Deficit Culture's 'white noise.' In any given episode of UK plc, T is beset by 'benefit cheats', who have reduced T's cosy, comfortable world to a post-apocalyptic desert, Broken Britain (8).

Pity T; turmoil is everywhere around, but help, in the form of real solutions to false problems, is at hand in a strategy to which there is, naturally, no alternative. On 27 September 2014, on the eve of the Conservative Party conference, the Daily Mail reported that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith had stated,

"We're not just getting people back to work,

we're making real inroads into that stubborn part of the out-of-work group who are in housing estates and unwilling to work. We are beginning to change this dependency culture that Labour so bred and are turning it into an independence culture where people see they can take control of their own lives." (9)

In reality, Britain's lived crisis is one of widespread poverty caused by low pay, underemployment, and unemployment, though no regular viewer of UK plc would ever come to that conclusion. This social drama played a central role in enabling Project Austerity, which, ten years on, has drastically reduced economic growth and social cohesion. In Britain, the state's calculated diversion of public resources into private hands produced a crisis it purported to be managing.

If this seems hard to imagine, it makes perfect sense in the context of neoliberal shock doctrine: "The coalition government isn't as stupid or stubborn as it appears [...] because spending cuts are not about deficits but about rolling back the welfare state. So no amount of evidence is going to change its position on cuts." (10) In the words of the General Secretary of Unite, Britain's largest trade union, its people have been set by its government on 'a path to poverty' (11).

A central aspect of democracy-building is the development of forms of public dialogue by means of which, "conflict is not avoided but takes place agonistically (as opposed to antagonistically)." (12) In the Global South, there is a long history among socially progressive groups of tackling common problems by building solidarities through deliberation and collective action. Popular mobilisation in El Alto city, Bolivia, shows that, where citizens accrue democratic capacity over time, 'it is indeed possible to build a political city out of the debilitating processes of neoliberal urbanisation'. (13)

Closer to home, on Saturday 27 October 2018, Michael D Higgins was re-elected President of Ireland, with a record total of votes. During his first term of office (2011-18), Higgins set out an alternative to neoliberal Austerity inflicted on the Irish people by the EU and IMF, after the collapse of the Irish banking system (2008). He sought 'to develop an ethical discourse that places human flourishing at the heart of public action', (14) and identified a set of central questions for that project, including,

"What constitutes a good life? What is necessary to human flourishing? What kinds of human capabilities do particular societies value, encourage, genuinely enable, or block? What conceptions of human nature and the good society >

underpin our contemporary economic discourse? Can we, as ordinary citizens, enter the discourse on economic policy issues, or are we too economically illiterate for that? Are the issues so complex as to require their being lifted out of the democratic parliamentary system?" (15)

His challenge – both to artists and intellectuals – is to go “beyond critical analysis in order to think positively about a set of principles by which we might live and explore the contemporary possibilities for developing ethical arts of economic government.” (16) This sets before performers and scholars a context for mobilising what performance is demonstrably capable of doing to enable human flourishing.

In a similar vein, Hilary Wainwright set out to map a new British politics of “material and cultural creativity, emerging beneath the political class [...] and to ask what political institutions, of state, party and economy, would be like if the practical knowledge of working and would-be working people were built into their decision-making.” (17)

What does this mean for performers?

Performance is a means of imagining life-in-common as the ethical underpinning of public life. Acts of performance are, but are not reducible to, forms of social dialogue. At their core is the capacity to imagine public life, and to inspire public deliberation, toward action for democratic change. Because performance is made, and happens among and between people, it is a radically collective achievement. Because it is unthinkable without the presence of others, it models democratic practice, and more effectively than purely rational argument, because it engages both the senses and human ethical capacities.

Dramaturgy and choreography grapple not only with ideas but with embodied moral and ethical states. Their currency is as much emotion as reason – hence their capacity to grip, as Bertolt Brecht argued in advocating for epic dramaturgical strategies to enable ‘complex seeing’. Embodied fictional worlds can enact, and therefore generate discussion on ‘how things ought to be’, beyond the tyranny of ‘the way things are’. Thus, they enable conversations to start beyond the limit situations of Deficit Culture.

In writing Austerity and the Public Role of Drama: performing lives-in-common (18), I didn’t want simply to add to the ‘ain’t it awful’ literature on the undoubted cruelty of Deficit Culture. My manifesto for a public role for Drama is grounded in the work of One Hour Theatre Company (OHTC) (19), supported by Edge Hill University, which imagines and rehearses strategies to enable human flourishing. An OHTC event involves both a short

play and a discussion of the ethical encounters it involves. By working both on the dramatic world and the actual worlds inhabited by audience members, OHTC strives to reveal the elephant in the room, while ensuring that those who would rather not see it remain in the space with those who see little else. I was inspired by responses to Michael Sandel’s ‘public philosophy’, which provide clear evidence, both of popular interest in ‘what democracies need’ (20), and people’s willingness to deliberate on pressing problems in public.

Our common crisis is one of sustaining peaceable, humane, sustainable co-existence. My 10-point Critical Performance Manifesto (21) attempts to show how performance might expose this, and, in so doing, enable a shared Dance Democracy.

Info

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