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What Voting Means

> Neutral dictionary definitions of the words of a language ensure their common features and guarantee that all speakers of a given language will understand one another, but the use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature. Therefore, one can say that any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language belonging to nobody; as an *other*'s word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. In both the latter aspects, the word is expressive, but … this expression does not inhere in the word itself. It originates at the point of contact between the word and actual reality, under the conditions of that real situation articulated by the individual utterance. In this case the word appears as an expression of some evaluative position of an individual person.
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> (Bakhtin, *Speech genres and other late essays,* 1986)

What does it mean to think of oneself as a voter? What does the act of voting involve, physically, intellectually and emotionally? What sort of memories, allusions and anxieties are evoked by the phrase, 'It's time to vote'? How do meanings of voting flutter between the seemingly neutral process-focus of officialdom, the tainted manipulations of campaign strategists and the situated contingency of everyday life, in which the vote is one of many

communicative encounters likely to end badly? How does it feel to be addressed as a voter upon whom the heavy burdens of duty, choice and worldliness are so frequently reducible to confusion, stealth and shame? This book is about the feeling of voting – a feeling so rarely probed that the act of voting seems smothered by the neutralizing anaesthetic of unreflective routine.

Few subjects arouse more radically conflicting associations than voting. It is the symbol of freedom; it is a futile gesture. It holds the powerful to account; whoever you vote for, the government always wins. It confers the dignity of citizenship; it affirms the gullibility of the led. It is the people's chance to be heard; it is a tedious period to be endured. It is hard to think of any other social practice that bears such a great weight of instrumental and affective signification. The political obsession of modernity has been the making of voters. Media images of people, long denied the vote, forming winding queues to assert their entry into the enfranchised world stand as semiotic markers of political progress. 'I'm about to tick a box', explained Marwa Gamil who was voting for the first time ever in the Egyptian election of November 2011, 'and someone far away is going to count it and in that way I'm going to make a difference'.[1] The alchemistic transmutation from a small 'tick' into a big 'difference' hovers somewhere between ritual fantasy and rational expectation. And yet, the intensity of attachments to voting as a right contrasts sharply with popular disappointments surrounding voting as a practice. Conceived generally as a sort of civic chore, both the act of voting and its outcomes seem over-determined and lifeless. In Russia's deeply flawed presidential election of March 2012, Vladimir Putin ordered that webcams be installed in 91,000 of the 96,000 polling stations across that vast polity in the hope that this would allay fears about the fraudulence that had previously led to mass demonstrations. Watching the archive of these long hours of plebiscitary tedium, there is scant evidence of the vibrant jubilation that had so movingly marked the fall of the

[1] 'Egypt elections: "my vote will make a difference"', *The Guardian*, 29 November, 2011.

Berlin Wall and the first multi-party elections in countries long under the yoke of dictatorships. Voters shuffled in and out, rarely pausing to speak. They might have been collecting their pensions or registering a death. There seemed to be a lot of sighing in the air. This was not just a manifestation of Russian lugubriousness. When people, from London and Los Angeles to Nairobi and Mumbai, are called upon to act as voters, they seem to adopt a posture of stolid resignation. As they perform from a democratic script, their postures and dispositions are inflected by the weight of thwarted experience.

In the course of my study of voting and voters within contemporary political culture, I observed a wide range of people casting votes in a number of different contexts, from parish and general elections to corporate and supranational plebiscites. My custom was usually to stand or sit inconspicuously at the back of a voting area for up to an hour, observing comings and goings, public interactions and secret scribblings. My observations, which were confined to Britain, were certainly not systematic, but they left me with three strong impressions. First, moments of voting are remarkably fleeting. Most voters entered, did their business and left within three to seven minutes; about as long as most people spend buying fast food or using a public convenience. Second, the event of voting seems curiously socially disconnected, giving it the appearance of something lodged between the scenes of a bigger social drama rather than an integral part of it. Voters would enter from and return to lives filled with personal hopes, frustrations, stories, characters and familiar settings, but the impersonal spaces of voting were devoid of these registers of intimacy. Third, acts of voting are surrounded by an eerie silence. There would be occasional interruptions of whispered uncertainty about procedural propriety and rare moments of cordial interaction between officials and voters, but the scarcity of these outbreaks only served to amplify the pervasive hush. As an observer, I was left with a strong sense that voters had more to say than they were ever encouraged to make known within the official places of voting. There were feelings to be explored that could not be articulated through a marked X on a ballot paper.

(The results of this exploration can be found in the interviews reported in Chapters 4 to 7).

Political scientists have paid scant attention to whether the experience of democracy is joyful or sombre, satisfying or frustrating, dignifying or shaming, or simply emotionally numbing. Such questions, they would say, are hardly matters of concern in evaluating the instrumental effectiveness of democracy. If elections are conducted fairly, governing institutions are sufficiently transparent, majorities are plausibly represented and minorities not unduly excluded; effective democracy can live with a range of affective deficits and failures.

To be interested in the affective character of voting is not to suggest that it should be thought of as primarily an affair of the passions, severed from its more common cognitive and instrumental connotations. Rather than seeking to sensationalise experiences of democratic engagement, the more modest aim of this book is to acknowledge that the sustainability of any cultural practice depends to a large measure on how it feels to participate in it. Democracy is experienced through a series of taken-for-granted and taken-by-surprise encounters, some direct and others mediated through vast institutions. These encounters leave impressions upon people's senses that cannot be expressed or explained in the clinical language of rationality. But neither are they irrational. As Sayer (2005:950) puts it:

> When someone says that they 'have good reason to be angry', they imply that, for example, someone has done something that objectively harms them, such as injuring them or slandering them. Likewise, feelings … such as envy, resentment, compassion, contempt, shame, pride, deference, and condescension are evaluative responses to particular properties of … inequalities and relations. They are influenced but not predetermined by positions within the social field.

To speak of responses to contemporary political democracy as being affective is not, therefore, to dismiss their evaluative nature, but to recognise that these are performative rather than objective appraisals of instrumental phenomena. Affects are best understood at the level of subjective experience; the impressions

that surround them have more to do with sentient expectations than pragmatic accomplishments. The acknowledgement of an affective deficit in contemporary democracy is based on an assumption that the way in which politics in general, and voting in particular, are conducted is incongruent with the sensibilities of citizens as rational and emotional makers of meaning.

Democracy, if it is to achieve shared and credible meaning, depends on commonly recognisable social performance. That is to say, there must be a widely understood relationship between how people act and what their actions are assumed to mean. As Alexander (2006:32) has pointed out, in simple, pre-modern societies, symbolic action and cultural meaning were fused through rituals based on shared beliefs and direct interactions within physical space. In complex, modern society, populations are more fragmented, beliefs less commonly shared and communicative interaction less immediate. The greatest risks facing late-modern culture emanate from cultural defusion: breakdowns in shared understandings of what it means to be and act together in the world. For Alexander (2006:55), 'The challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies … is to infuse meaning by re-fusing performance'. In other words, when voters are told that real power resides in their expressed preferences or that the noise emanating from parliaments and congresses is the sound of democratic representation, or that laws are the culmination of a process beginning at the ballot box, great cultural effort must be invested in ensuring that such messages have about them a ring of experiential credibility.

The risk of socially binding meanings of institutionalised acts such as voting being ignored, misunderstood or rejected is an abiding feature of late modernity. Traditional voices of authority can no longer rely on the attention of deferential listeners. Public trust in political institutions and processes has been slowly atrophying over a period of decades. The rules of the political game seem too much like imposed rules and someone else's game. These misalignments between official meaning and popular belief can be read as a direct response to the performative deficit

of political elites. For, while there is a widespread public belief that civic participation is important in principle, the feeling that there is a seamless connection between personal input (such as voting) and social outcome (the political order) is weak.

Whereas in the past (and still today for a dwindling minority of citizens), voting was a task to be performed as an act of solemn duty, it must now compete with a range of other public acts (including other, non-political forms of voting as entertainment) in which people might be enticed to engage. Post-ritualistic cultures must invent new ways of promulgating the joys of doing what their predecessors did without any hope of pleasure. Consider, for example, what was perhaps the most implausible political advertisement ever made, produced in November 2010 by the youth wing of the Socialist Party of Catalonia as part of its campaign to elect José Montilla as President of the Generalitat de Catalunya. The 90-second ad features an attractive young woman who is shown entering a polling station with a view to casting her vote. Exhibiting signs of uncontrollable excitement, she fills in her ballot paper and inserts it into the slit of the ballot box, not once, but several times, becoming visibly aroused with each repeated act of penetration. Then, observed by dull and disapproving polling officials, she reaches orgasm. The ad ends with the appearance of the words 'VOTAR ÉS UN PLAER' (voting is a pleasure) across the face of the screen.

What is it about this depiction of voting as an exciting – indeed, erotic – act that is both ridiculous and unsettling? Why is this image of democratic participation as a scene of impassioned exuberance most likely to make us think about everything that democratic participation is not? What is it about the social performance of voting that leads us to speak of it as a highly important and consequential act, but experience it as a cursory and nondescript chore? As the Catalan campaigners were to discover (their ad became a huge object of ridicule on YouTube), it is much easier to persuade people that something not in their interest is than to lead them to believe that something that feels tedious is exciting.

Consider another example of the radical misalignment between the act and meaning of voting. Until 2008, the UK

Channel island of Sark was regarded as the last feudal polity in Europe. It was governed by a *Seigneur*, who, holding his position as a fief from the Crown, was empowered to appoint the members of the island's governing council. Much of the island's economy (mainly comprising hotels and shops) was owned by two men: Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay, proprietors of the *Daily Telegraph* and the Ritz Hotel, who live on the neighbouring island of Brecqhou. As political 'modernisers', the Barclay brothers called for the island council to be democratically elected rather than appointed. In the island's first-ever election, which took place on 10 December 2008, the Barclays championed their own slate of anti-feudal candidates. Ninety per cent of the population of Sark voted, but not for candidates favoured by the Barclay brothers. They seemingly preferred the continued rule of the island's pre-democratic political elite. The immediate response of the Barclay brothers was to withdraw their investments from the island, thereby punishing voters for their recalcitrant stance. Two days after the election, the *Daily Mail* reported that 'the outcome of the election has upset the billionaire Barclay brothers who yesterday closed several hotels and shops that they own on the island.' Gordon Dawes, the twins' Guernsey-based lawyer, said: 'You can't expect people to continue throwing a lot of money into a community that doesn't want them.'

The story of this provincial spat between the politics of the ballot box and the economics of unaccountable investment is not peculiar to Sark. If, in all sorts of contexts, voters have come to believe that their decisions are only ever final if they are consistent with the intentions of other, rather less transparent sources of social power, how are they supposed to feel when they are told that they are the sovereign *demos* whose will is more important than that of anyone else? When, in reality, voters do not inscribe their wishes onto a fresh canvass, but must join dots put in place long before they were invited to form an opinion, the gap between voting and recognition comes to feel like an unyielding chasm. The consequential meaning of voting undermines the surrounding rhetoric of the act.

Political science textbooks and scholarly journals, dominated by discourses of rational choice, tend to describe the act of voting as if it were an affect-free operation. Psephologists have endeavoured to find out how voters make choices, the time of day they vote, the consequences of weather conditions on the turnout, the effects of ballot paper design and ordering of candidates' names on voting preferences, the influence of local votes on national ones and vice versa and the extent to which voters tell the truth about how or whether they voted. But not a single study (before this one) has ever asked people how it feels to vote; what it is like to walk to a polling station in the knowledge that one is about to exercise a democratic right (and perhaps perform a democratic rite); whether the experience of having voted leaves people feeling that they – or the world around them – is somehow different; or, indeed, why some people seem to like voting, on all sorts of issues in all kinds of social contexts, whereas for others the act of casting a vote possesses all the charm and potency of boiling a kettle. It is as if pursuing such visceral inquiries might taint the pristine scientificity that legitimates the traditional study of politics, as if the fullness of the democratic process is best captured through the cold measurement of numbers rather than the torrid excavation of messy affects.

This book sets out to challenge accounts of democracy that undervalue the vitality of affect. In exploring the gap between being counted and feeling counted, having a vote and having a voice, the languor of count-taking and the animation of account-giving, the aim of this study is to unearth the hidden genealogies of democracy, and particularly its most widely recognised, commonly discussed and deeply symbolic act – voting. As in all genealogical accounts, what has been lost is not immediately apparent; what is at stake is revealed through a slow process of questioning the taken-for-granted, engaging creatively with the fragmented and seemingly unrelated survivals of intellectual history and insisting on the non-essentiality of the subject. The aim here is to speak about voting as if there is nothing well-understood, obvious and ingrained about the concept. In doing so, I draw upon theoretical insights from thinkers who have

been eager to 'make visible the process by which what looks like homogeneity was written into modern mass culture' (Poovey, 1995:3). I propose to approach the idea of voting in the manner of Rorty's (1989:75) archetypal ironist who

> spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being.

The account of voting presented here distances itself from the political scientist's assurance that 'voting is voting; you know it when you see it.' Like Rorty's anxious ironist, my interest is in thinking of voting as an exotic, unsettled and problematic act that is most effectively apprehended through repeated redescription rather than semantic certitude. Language is not a self-contained system, but a process of intersubjective exchanges in which the production of meanings often exceeds the formal definition of terms. Terms like voting only acquire meaning when they are addressed to people who can be expected to make some kind of sense of them. But words do not come at us fresh: each time a word is uttered in speech or writing, it carries with it a history of authority or frivolity or intimacy or publicness. In short, language is experienced discursively and negotiated contingently. This point underlies the enormously important theoretical work of the Russian literary philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued:

> For the consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms, but a concrete heteroglot opinion on the world. All words taste of a profession, a *genre,* a movement, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, a day and an hour.

It is upon 'the consciousness living in' accounts and acts of voting and the 'taste' they convey and leave behind that this chapter is focussed. The aim here is to show how voting is constructed as a meaningful social performance. Fusion between act and meaning

is realised in many ways. The three outlined here – voting as metaphor, affirmation and quantification – certainly do not exhaust the repertoire of cultural perspectives, but are intended to cast light upon the constructed nature of conventional meaning.

Metaphors

A perusal of the extensive collection of Anglo-American political science textbooks would lead one to the conclusion that voting is a wholly disembodied experience. Votes are cast and counted, but by whom and how? There are swings and fluctuations, peaks and troughs, abstentions and miscounts, pounding and slender majorities, but these seem to be played out within a system of abstract dynamics, separated in every way from the fleshy, visceral world of the human body. It is as if votes have a life of their own: 'the vote determined that the airport will be built' or 'the Opposition benefited from the urban vote.' Pope's account of a man 'bled and purged … to a simple vote' well describes the discarnate electorate as conceived by political science. And yet everyday language tells a different story. In popular parlance, 'where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (Bakhtin, 1981:25), the body is returned to the voter. Hands are raised, heads are counted, thumbprints are stamped, the indifferent vote with their feet and, above all, there is the vote as voice, connecting brain and lungs to make sounds that give meaning to the world.

In traditional societies, to vote was literally to give voice. Before votes were ever cast or counted, people spoke to one another: they shared stories, argued the toss, presented evidence, told jokes, recited ballads, circulated rumours and orated poetically. Until the establishment of the Spartan *gerousia* (senate) in the seventh century BCE, support for proposals in the Homeric councils and assemblies was never counted, but shown by vocal acclamation.

Voices and votes are both historically and semantically intertwined: *vox* and *votum* in Latin, *voz* and *voto* in Spanish, *voix* and *vote* in French, *voce* and *voto* in Italian, *stem* and *stemming*