

Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

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Introduction

The phrase ‘the politics of gesture’ is used increasingly by the media and politicians alike. It has, however, two distinct meanings. In this paper I will use ‘gesture politics’ to describe the popular use of the term, and ‘the politics of gesture’, to describe its philosophical use. Finally, I will examine Personal and Social Education (PSE) in the light of the discussion.

Gesture Politics and the Politics of Gesture

The ‘popular’ usage is employed to deride politics as a cynical, manipulative sideshow. Here politics focuses on discourse as social practice (Fairclough 1997; 2000; 2003). Words and phrases are ‘condensation symbols’ around which coalesce the positive and negative emotions associated with a situation (Edelman 1964: p. 6). Consequently they are valued due to their power to arouse or to foster quiescence in the polis, and to confer on political actors insight in identifying threats to society, and the capacity to take decisive action to counter them (Edelman 1964). This modern politics has been termed the politics of spectacle and as managerial and ‘pseudo-democratic’ (Bos 2005: p. 37 - 39). The role of the polis is reduced to that of passive consumer of ‘images’ (Bos 2005: p. 37) and criticism of modern politics highlights its reduction to media spectacle.

In this characterisation of politics, gesture abounds and is viewed as a negative, cynical force that is empty and manipulative. The ‘pre-packaged and stage-managed nature of contemporary politics has developed alongside a loss of civic faith in politics and politicians (Putnam 2000). To describe policy as ‘the politics of gesture’ is to label it ‘false’ and artfully crafted with ‘audience reaction’ in mind. ‘Gesture politics’ has become shorthand for denouncing policy statements as opportunistic, and without substance or justification (Tempest 2001; Ludford 2003).

The philosophical usage derives from the work of the Agamben (2000). Here gesture is a positive term and ‘the politics of gesture’ is not a description of what is ‘wrong’ with contemporary politics, but an alternative to it.

Agamben draws on teleology and linguistics to conceptualise modern politics. He argues that the separation of the human from the animal is based on a “constitutive political act” rather than on anthropological fact (Bos 2005: p. 33). This reflects the work of Derrida, for whom the word ‘human’ would be a signifier (Butler 2002: p. 19), whose meaning derives not from intrinsic features of what it is to be human, but by reference to what it is not to be human; features of physicality and behaviour.

Agamben draws on Aristotle’s definition of (hu)man as a political animal (Mills 2005: p. 7) and Foucault’s concept of the modern exercise of power via biopolitics (as opposed to the traditional exercise of sovereign power on the individual and his/her body). In biopolitics, population is viewed as a political and scientific problem to be acted on through management, regulation and control of mortality (Generation Online 2006). Agamben examines the treatment of groups such as animals, children, refugees and prisoners from this biopolitical

perspective and how they are viewed as defective or not fully fledged humans (Mills, 2005: p. 34).

Agamben posits the politics of gesture as an alternative to modern biopolitics.

“What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and, therefore, of experiencing language’s limits, its *end*. A true community can only be a community that is not presupposed”

(Bos 2005: p. 40)

This politics addresses less-than-human, ‘bare’ life. Political inclusion lies not in being linguistically articulate but takes the body, and its capacity for gesture, as its starting point (Bos 2005: p. 37).

“The politics of gesture refers to a post-sovereign, non-exclusive, and affirmative politics. It is an anti-humanistic politics as it refuses to acknowledge a special status for human beings or for particular human beings.”

(Bos 2005: p. 42)

Application to the study of PSE

Recent years have seen increased discourse around the role of Personal and Social Education (alongside Citizenship). However, it should not be assumed that this higher profile for discussion and policy is translated into dramatic developments in practice or that it is primarily aimed at educative ends.

Rather, this discourse serves two political purposes. The first is politically symbolic. Government needs to be seen to be discussing and, in some sense, acting on societal concerns. By engaging in any discourse, government takes a role in generating public interest in it as a concern; itself a political act (Edelman 1964). Governments like to identify, discuss and be seen to deal actively with ‘moral panics’ (Buck and Inman 1998: p. 1 -2); PSE offers such an opportunity.

The second purpose is politically practical. The production of policy around an area as rich in condensation symbols as PSE is, delivers maximum political effect with minimum practical disturbance to the status quo. Sections of society are delivered the desired quiescence or arousal, by virtue of the existence of the discourse itself. In practical terms within schools, however, the accommodation afforded by the nebulous, polysemic terminology of PSE allows business as usual. PSE curriculum pronouncements are therefore not socially transformative but are a political means of dominating and controlling discourse and ultimately, protecting hegemonic interests (Apple 2004).

Agamben’s depiction of modern politics, focussing on containment of ‘non-humanity’, has resonances for education. A fervent debate in recent years centres on opposing conceptualisations of the child, namely the ‘child as being’ versus the ‘child as project’ (Hallden 1991). Is the child fully a citizen (and, in Agamben’s, terms a human) of now, or is s/he a future citizen/human moulded towards ‘completion’ by parents, educators and society?

The PSE curriculum can be seen as a tool for the definition and treatment of non-humanity. The curriculum implies an inherent model of children (physically and temperamentally distinct from the fully human - i.e. adults), as valid subjects for intervention and containment. The contemporary political preoccupation with containment of an underclass of society is manifest in the current 'Respect' agenda espoused by the New Labour government of which policies on PSE form part. The PSE curriculum is thus biopolitical. On one level it is a prescription against non-humanity (i.e. children are engaged in this curriculum in order to become fully human and gain entry to the polis) and on another a confirmation of the existence of non-humanity (i.e. children and families that lie outside the polis act as signifiers for those who lie within it).

The question this paper leaves open is can PSE be reconfigured to provide a space for the politics of gesture rather than another tool of biopolitics?

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