

**THE
BATTLE FOR
COMMON
SENSE:
LET'S BE
HAVING
YOU**

**FREEK
LOMME**

“The three central concepts of the philosopher Albert Hirschman are *exit*, *voice* and *loyalty*. In the context of civic involvement, *exit* implies that you stop participating, in your neighbourhood or in the representative advisory body at school, as soon as you are no longer satisfied with the situation. With *voice*, it's precisely about *not* stopping participating, but about seeking out consultation, going to vote or making your criticism on the course of events apparent via various forms of protest. *Loyalty* is a mediating variable which, when discontentment occurs, restrains *exit* and promotes *voice* (Hirschman 1970, p.79). But *loyalty* can equally point to satisfaction with the level of participation and thus not trigger *voice*, or it can be so powerful that citizens who are dissatisfied about the participation dare not activate their *voice*. In the latter case one perseveres in participating, but suffers in silence (Dowding et al. 2000). For a good democratic ratio between politics, government, social services and citizens, all three, *exit*, *voice* and *loyalty*, are necessary. It is important to provide enough possibilities for *exit*, and to organise *voice*, because, so it would appear, it is difficult for citizens to summon up *loyalty*.”

TÖNKENS AND VERHOEVEN, BRAVE BURGERS GEZOCHT
(RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS WANTED), P.260

The above quotations are taken from the book Respectable Citizens Wanted, the yearly publication of the Magazine for Social Inquiry, which came out in December 2010. This book connects seamlessly with the motivation for the Onomatopoe project ‘The Voice of...’ on which I began work at the same time as this book was published. I couldn't imagine a better introduction to this project—it grasps precisely what we want to put on the agenda. The drive which I feel, finds substance in their writing. In this text I would like to clarify precisely which aspects we want to pick up on in real life, how ‘The voice of...’ relates to this societal reality and what it attempts to catalyse.

THE PEOPLE

Why is it always THE people who are referred to? Intellectuals say it whenever they have enough arguments to warrant it, politicians say it in order to implement their policies over people, and people say it whenever they want to bring up ‘people’s’ characteristics.

People speak of ‘THE people’ in gossip. When they gossip with others about THE people, they try to get a grasp on their own position and that of other people. There are a great number of people. That's why gossiping, at any level, is of such importance. It happens.

It is actually gossip, as opposed to a proper exchange of information, on the basis of which we could declare ‘things are thus’. But they are not, because things are fickle, are incomplete, are in

part forgotten, are emotional, are tainted. “Democratic politics”, as sociologist Rudi Laermans discusses the work of philosopher Laclau, “requires the construction of a ‘people’ on the basis of one or more empty signifiers as well as an antagonism between ‘us’ and ‘them’...”. Whereby he argues, in effective if somewhat rigid language, that we need anchors or grips in order to construct our opinions. Subsequently we can put them on the political agenda. It's not so much about traditional class politics but simply about the language with which we stuff our surroundings into boxes and make them manageable.

‘NORMAL, THAT’S ALREADY DIFFICULT ENOUGH... AND THEN THERE’S ALSO ALL THAT BLOODY ABNORMAL’

A society needs to have a communal frame of reference. It is formed by a ‘collective memory’ of shared recollections. This manifests itself whenever we understand one another, ‘understand’ one another, without having to go on about it (endlessly). According to Frits Bolkestein the values of our roots encompass a Judeo-Christian tradition, the liberal and democratic legacy of thought, and the enlightenment.

The point is that these values are never clear in our daily lives. We take their existence for granted, experience an unarticulated connection of our values with other people, but never enunciate this explicitly. Just as well—discussing every bloody thing all the time won't get us anywhere.

Nevertheless, a fundamentally enlightened spirit will allow itself to be led for the main part by ‘righteous reasoning’, as opposed to a poorly proven supposition murmured by common sense, most likely from the mouth of some nit-wit peasant. On the other hand, this enlightened spirit will be such an enormous bloody bore that a lot of people will get a sudden urge to leave the room listening to their drivelling on. Likewise, the oafish peasant is more likely to be a person who will turn to violence as a solution for social tensions... each of us has the voice of reason on one shoulder, and that of common sense on the other. Alongside reason and sense there are plenty of arguments from outside the sphere of our own affairs and direct relationships—there is also such a thing as the abnormal which waltzes into our living rooms irrespective of whether it's invited. Behaving normal is actually already hard enough.

“In a first approximation, the everyday is what we are first of all, and most often: at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence. The everyday then, is ourselves, ordinarily. In this first stage, let us consider the everyday as without a truth proper to itself: our first move then will be to seek to make it participate in the diverse figures of the True, in the great historical transformations, in the becoming of what occurs either below (economic and technical change) or above

(philosophy, poetry, politics). Accordingly, it will be a question of opening the everyday onto history, or even, of reducing its privileged sector: private life.”

MAURICE BLANCHOT, *THE EVERYDAY*, 2008, P. 34

SUBJECTIVISATION

Three types of people are named—the inflexible, rational chap who desires to hang on to high culture, the direct but asinine nincompoop with his common sense, and then there are those strange characters who behave oddly and have peculiar ideas—think for example of women in burqas who look weird on the street, or that strange artist in the family. Then there’s a 4th type—the respectable citizens—okay schooling, good table manners, respectable mortgage, etc.

Despite the fact that the government and business desire to present a portrayal of mankind that matches their idealistic promises of a civil society—people have secure work, incomes, free time and choice—in short a specific bandwidth for marital bliss in the suburbs, there are actually a very few people with no abnormalities whatsoever. Something strange goes on behind each and every door, as we are reminded by TV programmes such as *Man Bijt Hond* (*Man Bites Dog*) that dives into private houses, and *De Rijdende Rechter* (*The Mobile Judge*), that performs ‘legal’ justice between neighbours. This we also know—we all go to visit friends, acquaintances and relatives where, beyond the front door, strange things take place.

An idea of collectiveness is created through the way that this portrayal of mankind, those who fit into this particular identity, is repeatedly presented to us over and over again in all sorts of communications. This is how it lodges in our collective identity.

That used to be okay—there used to be civil society, a society where, after all, the justice administering, implementing and legislating powers, guaranteed our emancipation—it was all about values. We proceeded with caution, trusting in that regime.

Now we live in a society where the government has washed its hands off the citizens. Suddenly it’s up to our individual selves to take care of matters, to ‘behave normally’. Suddenly there are no authorities in whose management of values we can trust.

Meanwhile there is still that ideal image of a life in civil society. So we determine our position between the certainty of that self-determined ideal image which summons us to ‘civic duty’, just as we stand before the uncertain challenge of how to find authority and integrity in it.

“We live in a culture in which the media image is so poundingly negative, so caught up in a closed loop of reporting on crisis, conflict and violence, that any counter-prevailing

examples and ideas are simply not part of the story. What results is a completely skewed portrait of our current circumstance. When faced with relentlessly negative images, it is no wonder that people get defensive and become convinced the world is more violent than it has ever been, even if that is simply not the case.”

BRUCE MAU, *DESIGN ECOLOGIES*, P. 16

In this visual culture where a conservative image of bourgeois society is projected for us by the cultural powers that be, we are searching for our singularity—‘who am I?’, and our place, ‘where do I fit into society?’ Suddenly there are huge numbers of floating voters and we speak of a ‘post-political society’. The call for morals and common sense is a logical one—we must not forsake our duty as normal people.

On the other hand, states literary scholar Yves Citton, quoting Baruch Spinoza², the man who is perhaps the greatest philosopher of our ‘national Judeo-Christian tradition’, it is “supremely valuable to act on the basis of rational understanding (intellectus) when we manage to master causal explanations (which should be our highest goal), we are necessarily tossed around by the coincidental associations of our imagination”.

‘STAND UP!’ AND/OR ‘STAY WHERE YOU ARE’?...

‘Luckily we stand up; refuse to relinquish our duties’: there is “...a type of amateur that, invited or uninvited, involves him/herself in discussions by experts and sets foot on domains which were previously closed to him/her. An amateur, in other words, who puts pressure on the professionals and their arguments and even threatens to topple them from their pedestal”

SEIJDEL, 2010, P. 13

Because of this, now that the professional is under threat, the enlightened spirit is also under threat. Their high culture has come under discussion. Suddenly so-called ‘reasonableness’ has been transformed, through a publicly propagated ‘common sense and decency norm’. Suddenly the high cultural ethical discourse that steered us to what was good behaviour and away from what was bad, has been taken over by the finger-wagging of the peasant nitwits who, based on ‘common’ sense say ‘you should (not) behave that way’. That is of course highly effective—it saves time and it saves a lot of money. In actual fact it shuts off a whole section of open speech and possibility. With this, the civil society that is given form through the vigorous observation of duties, is a culture of don’t-talk-just-do-the-job. In this culture, it’s the turn of the respectable citizen, the yes-man the entrepreneur or the nincompoop. The wayward citizen, who doesn’t just accept everything or who offers resistance, and the marginal citizen with divergent ways, is pushed

to the sidelines. The wayward citizen requires too much effort and therefore too much time and thus produces a low output, this is the way of 'effective' reasoning.

“In the search for respectable citizens there is a high risk that the government loses sight of voice in particular. Not only in the sense that they don't listen to what citizens are concerned with (Hurenkamp et al. 2006), but above all in that they don't know how to estimate the value of critical, contrary and wayward citizens. This means that all citizens who don't want to go along, talk along, or think along, are not good citizens.”

TONKENS AND VERHOEVEN, RESPECTABLE CITIZENS WANTED, P. 267

Despite the fact that everyone on board has to practice their civic duties, there is a particularly big vessel that has been thrown up in a rush by those aboard it. Above the ship, and visible from the shore and the hinterland, big signs are displayed, and flat-screens propagating the bourgeois dream: it's not a ship that sails on the seas of authority—something one has to earn—but a ship that builds on power—something one just takes. No-one on the ship accords even a glance to anyone on the shore, never mind anyone in the hinterland—they speak out like the best of helmsmen, but 'earn' only exclusion.

“The question is — if a cabinet that governs on the waves of societal petulance, anger and distrust, will pay enough attention to the respectable and wayward citizen? (...) So from the Rutte³ cabinet one cannot anticipate a dialogue with active citizens — but we can expect an emphasis on participation all the more.”

TONKENS AND VERHOEVEN, RESPECTABLE CITIZENS WANTED, P. 267

COMMON SENSE: COME ON THEN!

By and large, most individual citizens find it enormously difficult to discuss their voice. That doesn't happen 'just like that', that 'doesn't get anywhere'. In the first place this difficulty goes for the most ridiculous of all figures—the critical artist and the critical poet. They aren't even tolerated as court-jesters unless they preach **for THE people**. This goes equally for the really marginal—the paedosexual who is hunted throughout the country and the person under the burqa (is it a woman?), they are jeered off by the peasant oafs without being asked for reasoned arguments by the enlightened critic. To a lesser extent, this also goes for the floating voter who isn't permitted to doubt in order to come to reason and so is kept on a tight rein—artificially remaining a respectable citizen. In all these cases it is apparent that citizenship, as formed by civic duties, is rigorously excluding. This makes visible a deficient democracy. Worse still, when you don't recognise wayward people and refuse discussion, there is the chance that demagoguery increases. This

indicates not so much a lack of respect for 'being difficult' and endless bullshit, rather, it is a lack of respect for the humanist and enlightened tradition that we recognise here. It is a liberalism of the marketplace but not our liberalism. The citizenship that we are **allowed to dream of, is a citizenship conforming to market values which seduce us in no mean language with talk of immediate yields and are dished out in bite-sized mouthfuls—who dares to push market values to the side.**

Giving *voice* is a form of government by citizens, who are thus able to correct, improve or try to change completely, the democratic nature of the practices in which they find themselves. This can be done by respectable citizens if they are put in a position to do so, but giving *voice* also plays a role with contrary citizens who determine for themselves when they give *voice* to the government.

TONKENS AND VERHOEVEN, RESPECTABLE CITIZENS WANTED, P. 260, 266, 267, 268

Let us take the liberty to dream our own dream, without any immediate returns, but as free people in a society for free people, call it 'democratic society' for now—a term to be expanded upon another time.

Endnotes

- 1 Rudi Laermans, Open 20, 2010, The Popular Imagination, p. 73.
- 2 Yves Citton, Open 20, 2010, The Popular Imagination, p. 61.
- 3 The first Liberal prime minister in decades, started in 2010.

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