

A Latecomer To Political Protest

By Sian Lewin – @SianLewin

On Monday 30th January, I was compelled to do something I had never done before. I went to Downing Street to protest against the Trump travel ban and the apparent appeasement of the new White House incumbent by Prime Minister Theresa May. Despite my upbringing by a *Spare Rib* reading, feminist mother and a liberal, tolerant and compassionate father, I had never been to a political demonstration or rally before. After all, it's not for the lack of opportunity over the last thirty or so years – the poll tax protest, demonstrations against the Iraq war or the introduction of tuition fees – to name a few. However, this time, for three key reasons, things felt different and I felt spurred into action.



Firstly, having spent the last four years in the LSE's Sociology department, I have been radicalised. In a good way. I have been exposed to research and dialogue with colleagues and students about inequalities, neoliberalism, feminism and class differences. This has not only deepened my understanding of these issues, but has also fundamentally changed the way I think about them. In revealing to me some of that which had been hidden (Bourdieu, 1996, p17), Sociology had done its work.

Secondly, the divisions and harm caused to the vulnerable in our society have become more acute in the years following the 2008-9 financial crisis. See, for example, **the rising numbers of street homeless**, the avoidable deaths that have resulted from the barbaric **benefit sanctioning regime** and the **stigmatization of whole groups in society**. The human beings (and we are, in the end, all human) on the receiving end of austerity politics have become increasingly vilified and stigmatised by politicians and the media, leading to further divisiveness and Othering. **The sharp rise in the levels of racist and religious hate crime** following the Brexit vote illustrates the 'success' of this divide and conquer strategy, as does the rush to blame the 'white working class' or the 'baby boomers' for the result.

Finally, the result of the EU referendum in the UK, and the recent election of Donald Trump to the President of the United States have encouraged the legitimization of the process (and consequences) of Othering mentioned above. This lack of compassion towards the suffering of our fellow humans is characteristic of late neoliberal capitalism, an ideology that depends on individualism and self-interest. I do not want to be part of a society which values material interests above community, where everything becomes commodified and marketized, where through continual consumption we are complicit in the elite project to maintain power (Harvey, 2005).



I accept the argument that there have been many previous issues that I could have demonstrated about, including state visits from figureheads of repressive political regimes. My decision to join the protest on the 30th January was the culmination of my own consciousness-raising, disgust at how the vulnerable in our society are being treated and the very concerning direction that politics in the US and the UK seems to be taking. I felt I could no longer stand by and do nothing. It felt good to join the large, diverse crowd, united in the desire to show that policies such as the travel ban are not acceptable, that demonization of groups of people will not be tolerated and that we will not allow hard-fought for civil rights to be eroded.

Participating in this public protest felt like an important symbolic action, but as I returned home on the tube full of commuters with their blasé outlook (Simmel, 1903), clutching my hand-made sign, I realized that it will take a lot more to change or even raise the collective consciousness. Protests and similar direct political actions are necessary but not sufficient to achieve real and meaningful social justice – we need to confront the status quo, challenge received wisdom and be willing to open our minds to new imaginaries of how society could be.



My belief is that we need to escape the intellectual confines of the neoliberal orthodoxy, for example by joining those who are **questioning the holy grail of continuous economic growth**, recognizing and challenging the political power of big business (Wilks, 2013), and by thinking creatively about how to live in a sustainable manner that cultivates caring and sharing rather than dividing and conquering. These are not my ideas, but I am beginning to explore them because in addition to direct action, I think it is crucial to develop sound ideational foundations for an

alternative future – one which celebrates difference, protects the vulnerable and safeguards the future of the planet.

I will, however, continue with my nascent career of political protest at the same time, to connect with others who share my views and values, to show solidarity and to be part of a more hopeful future. I will be marching on 20th February as part of a day of national action by **1 Day Without Us**. Do come and join in!

References

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