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'The people', policing and power

Elaine Campbell argues for different ways of doing democracy

Claims to be democratising the governance of public policing has a long trajectory in the UK, the most recent manifestation of which is the introduction of elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) across 41 police force areas in England and Wales - see *Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011* (Part 1). The electoral basis of PCC appointments underpins the democratic credentials of the office and ensures that PCCs remain accountable to the communities they serve. In her ministerial foreword, the Home Secretary claimed that this signalled 'the most radical change to policing in 50 years...we will transfer power back to the people' (Home Office, 2010).

Setting aside, for a moment, the question of who 'the people' are, and where and how the boundaries of inclusion are set, a more interesting analysis might ask what 'the people' *do* in conditions of popular empowerment. As a practical politics, the transference of power seems to rest primarily on the periodic casting of a vote. However, given a renewed emphasis on transparency, openness and inclusiveness in the strategic determination of localised policing priorities, we can already see the proliferation of opportunities for 'the people' to interact and deliberate with elected PCCs through, for example, deliberative forums, town hall meetings, citizens' juries, social media and local surgeries. Moreover, and alongside conventional, consultative tools such as opinion polls and surveys, good use is being made of new media and digital platforms as communicative spaces where views and preferences can be expressed and exchanged. This all buffs up the democratic shine of 'people power' over policing at the local level – but it amounts to a rather normative description of empowerment, and still leaves unanswered the question of what 'the people' *actually* do.

On the face of it, 'the people' make very little effort to exercise their democratic power. The inaugural PCC elections marked the lowest electoral return in UK peacetime, with a reported average poll across England and Wales of 15.1% (Garland and Terry, 2012). While one polling station in Newport achieved overnight notoriety with absolutely no votes cast, voter

turnout ranged from 11.6% (Staffordshire) to 20% (Northamptonshire), leaving the Electoral Commission to declare that this was 'a concern for everybody who cares about democracy' (Electoral Commission, 2013: 3). Despite this unimpressive start, there is nonetheless an optimism that a renewed emphasis on consultation and deliberation will reinvigorate levels of public engagement with policing affairs. However, this may be a little misplaced amidst continuing concerns that deliberative models fail to live up to their promise. Far from promoting and sustaining participatory democratic practice, some commentators note that only a small, unrepresentative minority of people are inclined to articulate their views; that selection into the consultative process is neither transparent nor appropriately undertaken (through stratified random sampling, for example); that deliberation is open to manipulation, has no ultimate impact on decision-making, and is frequently ignored (McLaverty, 2009). On these views, democratic agency is neither prolific nor empowered. Indeed, there are some who reject entirely contemporary trends to 'engineer democracy', and remain highly sceptical of the compatibility of deliberative modes of 'people power' within representative political systems (Blaug, 2002).

While I am sympathetic to these complaints, they are predicated on a very narrow understanding of democratic practice. Such accounts adhere to an overly proceduralist concept of political agency which not only corrals 'the people' into specific and formalised sites and spaces of participation – the ballot box, the opinion poll, the Twitter account, and the complaint letter – but also unduly cramps our appreciation of what is done, and what it is possible to do in the name of, and at the periphery of democratic activity. If there is a dearth of imagination about the *doing* of democracy, and a correlative belief that 'the people' do very little, this may be less a reflection of empirical reality than an absence of creative and lateral thinking about how democratic agency is theorised. In this short paper, I want to delineate three contemporary frameworks which, broadly conceived, are indicative of post-representational approaches to democratic theory. In different ways, these perspectives shift and transgress the boundaries of what counts as political practice and public engagement in a liberal democracy, and in so doing paint a more vibrant, theatrical and dynamic picture of popular empowerment in which 'the people' are usually busy and active.

In *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000), Iris Marion Young argues for an inclusive model of deliberative democracy, but remains critical of how inclusion is theorised within first-generation deliberative accounts, such as those propounded by Habermas and Rawls. While

supportive of the view that dialogue and discursive exchange are essential for public debate, she is critical of the hitherto insistence that this should conform to orderly, rational modes of communication. As a criterion of eligibility to deliberate, a preference for 'ideal speech', she argues, not only privileges the participation of particular groups, but it denies those who have 'unruly voices' the opportunity to speak and be heard. Seeing merit in rhetoric, storytelling, symbolism and the use of disorderly, emotionally-charged speech and action, Young not only shifts our attention to alternative sites of discursive practice (the streets, workplaces, leisure and entertainment outlets, the home), but also its different modes and surfaces of expression (eg: comedy, cartoons, graffiti, slogans and banners). On this view, 'the people' emerge as thoroughly active and engaged in a vocal and expressive politics which draws attention to issues of legitimate public concern outwith PCC-determined deliberative arenas and styles. By acknowledging and accepting the validity and value of 'unruly voices' – which are likely to be openly mocking and dismissive of how policing matters are being managed – a more organic, inclusive form of democratic practice is made possible.



Figure 1: Graffiti hoarding at the G20 protests, London, 2009

All that said, there is more to democratic agency than speaking, listening and writing. For Hannah Arendt, an over-reliance on deliberation and debate tells us nothing about the nature of resistance, oppositional politics and antagonistic citizen participation. In *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Between Past and Future* (1961), Arendt draws attention to the performative dynamics of democratic practice, seeing the body and corporeal power as the locus of popular sovereignty. Arendt values spontaneous action (eg: civil disobedience, demonstrations, occupations, stunts and protests) over rule-based behaviour (eg: presenting a petition, attending a town-hall meeting); where the latter is driven by an inclusionary impulse, the former seeks disruption and confrontation. The performative force of political

action not only has a capacity to physically stop or slow down a process – the eviction of the traveller community from Dale Farm, for example – but also to rupture the comforting inertia of established policing strategies, initiating alternative ideas and new beginnings which Arendt describes as ‘miracles’. Performative democratic agency may, in the end, be counter-productive and easily dismissed as ‘ineffective tantrums of desperation that can have no real impact on politics itself’ (Drexler, 2007: 10). However, this misses the Arendtian point that it is precisely because performative action is boundless, uncontrollable, uncontainable, dispersive and unpredictable which makes it crucial for deep democracy and constitutive of the expressive texture of everything we call democratic freedom.



Figure 2: Women Against Rape: Slut Walk, London, 2011

Arendt’s work on corporeal and performative power reminds us that there is more to democratic practice than deliberative exchange. In *The Eyes of the People* (2011), Jeffery Green extends this line of argument by positing that popular empowerment is so firmly established as a vocal force as to be *the* universal constant of modern democratic theory. Yet, the ‘metaphorics of voice’ bear no relationship to how politics is experienced by the majority of people, most of the time. For Green, democratic engagement is primarily an ocular activity centred on spectatorship and the gaze. In an age of mass communication, and the proliferation of televisual, broadcast and digital technologies, a particular style of visual politics is normalised; the photo opportunity, the TV interview, the televised news item and the cult of personality, not only cements the gaze into the fabric of everyday life, but also empowers viewers to scrutinise and appraise their policing representatives in conditions of publicity which are not entirely in their (PCCs’) control. In less than a year since their introduction, there has been no shortage of spectating opportunities – the Paris Brown Twitter-storm (Kent PCC); the Richard Rhodes expenses row (Cumbria PCC); controversies

over the sackings, suspensions and forced resignations/retirements of Chief Constables (Gwent, Lincolnshire, Cumbria, Avon and Somerset PCCs). These several spectacles incite a practical politics predicated on the viewing experiences of a watchful and empowered public who, perhaps through storytelling and everyday conversation, pass judgement on their PCCs bringing them to account through the democratic power of an unrelenting and critical gaze.

As the dust settles on the reconfigured landscape of police governance, there may be a rush to evaluate and assess the democratic purchase of reform. Pursuing conventional lines of inquiry, which foreground popular empowerment over policing as a series of procedural relationships, is unlikely to identify anything new or unexpected. What I hope to have encouraged in this discussion is an alternative research agenda which, by taking a post-representational turn, will encounter 'the people' and their democracy elsewhere and otherwise.

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