

Lost for words

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I look out through the prism of daily press briefings, and escalating cycles of bad news. Shouting at the tv is not enough, but I no longer have capacity for anything more.

All those years of political consciousness, of activism, of analysis and writing of policy engagement, and sometimes influential research come to naught, when it perhaps matters more than ever.

Is that why I am depressed beyond reason?

As I began trying to write this piece, I came across Elif Shafak's *How to stay sane in an age of division*¹. It ends with a reflection on anxiety, anger and apathy, three emotional registers amplified by Covid-19. These speak to my sense of what is going on, both personally and politically. I am finding it hard to separate a previous active, and sometimes fluent self from a self whose words and thoughts drift pass without becoming substantial enough to capture on the page. This sense of being *lost for words* dominates my experience (now intensified by the onset of Parkinson's disease). This is, of course, a particular, situated experience. Now retired, I am no longer having to conform to the hierarchies of university life, to weigh the risks of teaching face to face or the demands to produce 'world class' research. I still use writing - about Brexit, about austerity, about the rise of populism - as a form of personal and political therapy, but Covid-19 presents a different challenge, one that invites passive withdrawal. The virus is a disembodied force, not amenable to analysis or argument. Avoiding it requires retreat and isolation, not active engagement. It attacks the very breath I breathe, and the possibility of communicating with others. And for those who succumb to the virus, it promises to steal life itself.

How can I overcome the anxiety that not only pervades my relationships with others, but that also preempts any attempt to plan future projects and possibilities? How can I transcend the climate of anger that seems to displace positive thought and action? How can I avoid the pitfall of apathy that threatens to confine me to the trinity of sofa, tv and sleep? How can I learn to write again, and more particularly, return to the kind of political engagement that might give me something to write – and shout - about?

Despite inviting retreat and rupturing human relationships, the consequences of COVID-19 for society and culture are contradictory. It has produced a remarkable upsurge of local action to provide material and emotional support to others. But political discourse has been reshaped into arguments about competence and effectiveness. The language of a more expansive politics is actively being subordinated to immediate concerns. I find myself literally lost for words.

This is a phrase that often came up in my earlier research – an analysis of interviews with four generations of women trying to bring about political and institutional change². Many spoke about how ideas generated by social movements had been incorporated into governmental discourse – with the meanings they intended being stripped away as the words were translated to fit neoliberal political projects. Some women spoke of their pain at seeing how notions of equality, flexibility and choice had been appropriated and recast in the language of ‘fairness’ by governments seeking to win consent to policy programmes concerned to undermine collective claims for rights and justice. They talked of how ideas of rights had been displaced by the language of consumerism, opening up the greater marketisation of public services. And they decried the ways in which their critiques of state institutions and policies had been silenced by austerity programmes. The hollowing out of institutions that resulted from cuts and closures had left campaigners stuck between arguing for the restoration of what had been lost, despite their critiques, and abandoning the state as the potential source of beneficial policies.

The context of the pandemic is very different, but is there something that might be learned from contemporary battles to shape and manage political discourse? In the next section I explore some of the words of the pandemic and examine how they have worked to legitimate the UK Conservative party’s political project, and how alternative political meanings are being subordinated.

Talking COVID

Listening to the press briefings and ministerial speeches of 2020, certain words and phrases recur regularly. These include

‘Following the science’

‘Putting our arms around’ [care homes, care workers]

‘Sadly’ [died]

‘It is with a heavy heart’ [that I announce]

‘We are all in this together’

‘World beating’

‘Home’ [working from/staying at]

‘Working tirelessly’ / ‘working night and day’

There are many others, and readers might like to suggest their ‘favourites’ as contributions to discussion in the panel session. Those chosen here are all taken from the press conferences or statements of the UK prime minister and ministers, often amplified through the Tory press. My purpose is to suggest a method for assessing the ways in which the meanings of words becomes expanded, constricted or transformed as they become elements of a populist politics. The analysis of political discourse requires a much more detailed method than that proposed here, one in which words are situated in their historical context, in which chains of equivalence, oppositions and juxtapositions are noted, and which explores how words may be articulated together in new ways. Attention might also be paid to the ways in which discourse is ‘heard’, taken up, adopted or appropriated by those whom it targets. Here I simply sketch the contours of the beginnings of such a project rather than its full development.

Following the science

Defending their decisions – to lock down, to delay lockdown, to open or close schools, to close or open borders and so on – there has been repeated reference to ‘*following the science*’, a statement legitimated by the physical presence of government scientists at press conferences. This is a big shift for a populist government whose leading figures have, over the last 5 years or more, vilified experts as members of ‘elites’ and whose knowledge is viewed as antithetical to popular ‘common sense’. Rather than the old Blairite mantra of evidence-based policy, we have lived with policy processes that rely on a leader’s sense of where public opinion is pointing. This has been evident in the recent oscillations and U turns that indicate the fragility of a strategy of subordinating scientific

evidence to short term political imperatives. Yet the claim to be following the science is unmuted. One consequence is that those challenging political choices have little or no comeback – positioning the questioner as implicitly ‘against science’ offers an easy win.

But that is not all: it is necessary to ask ‘what science’ is at stake. SAGE has members representing many different scientific disciplines. Alongside epidemiology and medicine have appeared the quasi-scientific approaches of ‘modelling’ – predicting the likely course of the pandemic. There was also an emphasis on ‘behavioural science’, concerned with ‘nudging’ people to adopt certain behaviours (but unconcerned with the issues of trust and competence that might persuade them to act in the general interest). But other scientific disciplines – notably sociology and geography – were not represented. This meant that the relationship between COVID-19 and social or regional inequalities tended to be ignored. Attention to the disproportionate impact on Black and Asian populations came very late – and even then the initial accounts leaned heavily towards biological or behavioural explanations, and politicians revealed their discomfort trying to get their tongues round the words BAME. Similarly, the upsurge in violence against women was hardly on the policy horizon for many months. The languages of structural racism, social class and gender inequality were systematically excluded.

Affective claims – the poverty of feeling

The claims about following the science can be contrasted with the populist emphasis on appeals to public sentiment and feeling in government discourse – its ‘affective claims’. Announcing the daily numbers of new cases, hospitalisations and deaths, ministers have consistently used a feeling term, announcing that [number] have ‘*sadly died*’, or ‘*my heart goes out to*’ relatives. These affective claims may be considered little more than discursive flourishes whose very repetition signals their emptiness. But they represent an attempt to voice – to ventriloquize - the emotions of the wider population of bereaved and distressed citizens, appropriating (a thin) emotion-talk to legitimize an increasingly weak and incompetent government.

In a similar vein, Johnson’s press conferences have been littered with references to his own distress at having to make tough decisions – ‘*I hate having to..*’, ‘*Alas...*’, ‘*I do this with a heavy heart*’ and so on. This tends to mask the way in which tough decisions have been consistently avoided or delayed, exacerbating the spread of the virus. Such self-dramatising pronouncements seek to deflect blame by constructing an image of a great

leader wrestling with his conscience and personal emotions, rather than an incompetent leader failing the challenges of governing through crisis.

'Care' appears as recurrent theme, but with a narrow set of associations. While there have been numerous attempts to clothe governmental action with a softer, 'feeling' ambiance – as in the statement that the government had been '*putting our arms around*' care homes to protect them. Initially, care homes tended to be ignored in the overall project of 'protecting the NHS', until appalling infection and death rates became evident. These can largely be attributed to the historical subordination of 'care' to 'health', and of care homes to hospitals. Domiciliary care, and the informal care work of families, of health workers caring for those in the last phases of life, of neighbours and communities caring for the vulnerable, have been largely unacknowledged in government talk. And while there has been much talk of 'we are all in this together' there seems to have been less focus on encouraging local solidarities, mutual aid and support. Citizens, voluntary bodies and local authorities have been largely abandoned.

Discourse alone could not prevent public dismay about the rising number of deaths, the lack of PPE equipment, the failure of 'test and trace', the contradictory education policies and so on, all resulting in a series of embarrassing U turns. But beneath these disruptions lies a deeper political current intended to shore up legitimacy. This is associated with what some academics have termed 'emotional governance', a form of governing that seeks to elicit particular behaviours by inducing feelings rather than rational calculations.

Affective claims are a basic strategy of populist governments whose focus is on fostering feelings of identification (with the leader) and trust (in his policies and programmes). Imagery (such as '*squashing the sombrero*', '*world beating*', or the virus as a '*mugger*') is more important than information; appearance trumps competence. Hyperbolic claims take centre stage, whatever the evidence to support or negate them. For example, Johnson's claims that the UK's responses have been '*world beating*' can be readily dismissed; and indeed became embarrassing at a point at which the new strain of the virus made Britain something of a pariah state. But I have included it to emphasise the discursive flourishes that flowed from the coincidence of Brexit negotiations ('*deal or no deal*') and the need to legitimate the UK's (failing) responses to the pandemic. The governmental hype about the nation in the world/the globe serves to marginalize alternative conceptions of place and space that seek to build solidarities across borders. And we might contrast the Conservative party's project of asserting a confident and powerful image of the UK,

preoccupied with its sovereignty and past images of colonial power, with its apparent incapacity to perform competent governance within its own borders. The chasm between these opposing images has often been too great to be filled by discursive flourishes, leading to rapid disenchantment with Johnson as the embodiment of a failing administration.

Affective claims are, however, not the only discursive strategy in play. 'Protecting the NHS' or 'stimulating the economy' have typically been constructed as a binary opposition. The former elicits images of care, sympathy and sacrifice, and is closely associated with the evocation of collective identifications with a beloved institution. This is why Johnson and other government figures initially encouraged – and participated in – the 'clap for carers' ritual. In contrast, 'stimulate the economy' evokes the impersonal transactions of the market and employment. These are depicted as a zero-sum relationship – increasing the emphasis on one is at the inevitable expense of the other.

My interest is, first, in the consequences of the particular meanings of 'the economy'; and second, the effects of the binary structure of meaning in which care and economy are opposed. Together these have shaped transformations in the meaning of 'work' during the pandemic.

Whose work?

There are a number of different inflections of 'work' in governmental discourse. First, work appears as a simple process, a set of tasks and functions that can be readily stopped and started - furlough conceived as a temporary rupture - or subject to substitutions. For example, working from home, it seems, can easily substitute for labour in offices and other businesses. with little or no organizational, personal or familial cost. And childcare and education are assumed to readily shift from schools and nurseries to the home, without the transfer of significant costs. 'Home' has been used as a unitary category, with no acknowledgement of the differential distribution of 'good' housing and the struggles of some to manage in overcrowded or poor quality accommodation – a factor that may help explain the north/south, urban/rural disparities in COVID cases.

Second, little attention has been paid to the labour of transforming hospitals, care homes, shops, cafes, schools, hairdressers and other enterprises, all of which have placed new burdens on 'frontline' workers (the associations with the military meaning of 'front line' are

particularly striking. Like front-line infantry in a war, these are the workers who are likely to die first). Such costs and burdens are of course highly gendered. Both the emotional and physical costs of changing working practices are largely 'women's work'. But the dominant emphasis on transactional labour has overridden any attention to the informal and relational labour women give to keeping 'the economy' going.

Third, the emphasis on 'working from home' masks a silence about the fate of those unable to do so – including health workers, delivery drivers, shop workers, transport workers and others in the low paid and gig economies. This silence is at the root of racial distribution of COVID. While there is now an acknowledgement of the impact on 'ethnic minority' 'BAME' communities, this came late and there was a widespread reluctance to link it to the structural racism or to any wider acknowledgement of class-based and geographical inequality.

Fourth, the transactional conception of work, and its limitation to paid employment, means that the Informal labour of those trying to mitigate the impact of COVID has been overlooked. There have, of course, been many 'good news' stories in the media as reporters have sought to give people a relief from constant gloom. These have, however, tended to focus on individual heroes and heroines working to support their local communities. The wider pattern of informal labour, and the exhaustion that often results from it, have received rather less attention. In contrast, government press conferences and interviews with ministers have made frequent references to how they have been 'working tirelessly' or 'working day and night' to fix policy problems and failures.

These different conceptions of work suggest dominant orderings of visibility and legitimacy. The gendered and racialized dynamics of the shifting patterns of paid and unpaid labour have received scant recognition. The 'emotion work' of staff in intensive care units and in care homes, making judgements about who should live or die, supporting the dying and the bereaved, and watching colleagues and kin succumb to the virus, has offered potent media images – but scant recognition in terms of pay or access to resources. The informal labour of those working in food banks, supporting local communities, organising mutual aid networks, has offered heroic images but little sustained recognition or analysis. And the reversal of years of women's progress towards equal pay and recognition has hardly been noted. The rise in domestic violence has overwhelmed the resources that women built through collective action, campaigning and fundraising. Given the shifting discourses of work noted here, it is unclear how women

might reengage with the struggles for equality and recognition - not to mention safety – that won concessions in past generations. For example, the emphasis on working from home has a perverse relationship with women’s own demands for flexible working and trade union campaigns for parental leave. It represents the ultimate success of such campaigns, yet it is a strangely hollow success given pressures and hardships that result. This is not what women of my generation fought for. What languages of justification might be used for the next generation of political struggle – or will women be ‘lost for words’ trying to secure recognition and participation as well as rights?

In a different way, the languages of flexibility and choice used by past political campaigns around work and employment have underpinned capitalism’s moves to expand the ‘gig’ economy, zero hours contracts and other devices that have created a peripheral, disposable and low paid workforce. This workforce is largely peopled by the young and is highly gendered and racialized. What linguistic and institutional resources might be needed to redress the patterns of inequality that result? How far might the Black Lives Matter movement be able to engage with issues of work, labour and institutional change? How far can young people with terrible employment prospects build institutions that might take on the downward spiral of pay and security, especially in the context of more urgent and pressing issues (climate change, racial violence, the trafficking of vulnerable populations). Workers’ rights, equality and justice feel like rather unfashionable political discourses.

Silences and absences

Words are not only being lost, they are being actively stolen and made to mean something other than the speaker/writer intended. Earlier I referred to my past research with activist women to show how concepts generated by ‘progressive’ forces or movements had been appropriated and made to serve contemporary governmental and ideological projects.

One might extend this kind of analysis to explore ways in which government suddenly discovered the language of care during the pandemic, amplifying it to clothe their incompetence and failures with a borrowed warmth. This is having a double cultural effect. First, it is very difficult for critics to appear to be against care. What language might one use to challenge Boris Johnson’s pronouncements about ‘putting our arms around’ people to protect them during the pandemic? Second, by appropriating the language of care the voices of those actually doing care work tend to be silenced, other than as exemplars of

the kind of selflessness and devotion that government - and media - wish to promote. Care comes to have a strangely flattened meaning, detached from concerns about material labour, unequal risk and the sharpening of inequality.

Inspirations

Of course, these appropriations are imperfect; residual meanings continue to circulate, often erupting back into the mainstream as 'events' create opportunities, and as activists work to find alternate vocabularies through which new political projects might be developed. We can see this in the rise of the Black Lives Matter movements that not only drew attention to the racialised care economy, but that also offered new vocabularies of culture, empire and Britishness. We can see it in the growing support for environmental activism, and the rise of new languages of protest generated by the young. And we can see it in the proliferating writings expressing the goal of 'not going back' to pre-covid-19 ways of life as people - often, but not exclusively, women - celebrate the reduction of traffic, the greater focus on local food chains, the upsurge of 'community' spirit and mutual aid, the transformation of cities, and the 'greening' of towns and cities.

If things are not to simply revert to the way they were pre-lockdown, what are the linguistic battles that must be conducted to ensure that writers and other activists do not find themselves 'lost for words'?

Some feminist academics have offered conceptual resources for imagining new worlds. For example, Davina Cooper, Morag McDermont and colleagues at the Open University use the term 'Reimagining' in their work on economic and institutional change, arguing not for tinkering at the edges but for drawing on imaginings from diverse struggles and movements to propose alternative futures³. Kate Raworth's work on the 'donut economy' and the Gender Budget Group both offer resources to rethink economic relationships from a gendered perspective⁴, while feminist work on care – by Joan Tronto, Marian Barnes and Fiona Williams, among others – offers ethical and relational, rather than transactional, understandings⁵. These are not simply 'imaginary' but rooted in changes emerging from practice, in oppositional spaces, in alternative experiments and in prefigurative institutions in the social economy (J.K. Gibson-Graham⁶).

We might also look to journalists, commentators and other writers mapping responses to the pandemic. There has been a proliferation of mutual support groups, neighbourhood

projects, voluntary action, charitable work and so on around food, homelessness and overcoming loneliness. Rebecca Solnit offers ways of emphasizing hope rather than despair, while Marina Sitrin and the Colectiva Sembrar explore how the pandemic is generating new solidarities, with examples drawn from across the globe⁷.

All offer alternative ways of remaking political, economic and cultural life. But these currently remain on the periphery and are vulnerable to the current amplification of so-called 'culture wars' that undermine, dismiss and belittle the languages generated by social movements and prefigurative experiments. Such wars suck our energies, leaving us potentially lost for words. As such, as Nesrine Malik argues, they deflect us from the political practices of making new worlds and telling new stories.⁸

¹ Shafak, E (2020) *How to stay sane in an age of division*. Profile Books.

² Newman, J. (2012) *'Working the spaces of power; activism, neoliberalism and gendered labour'*, Bloomsbury.

³ Cooper, D, Dhawan, N and Newman, J eds (2020) *Reimagining the State: theoretical challenges and political possibilities*, Routledge 2020. McDermont, M, Cole, T, Newman, J and Piccini, A, eds ((2020) *Imagining Regulation Differently: cocreating for engagement*. Policy Press.

4. Raworth, K (2018) *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*. Random House. The Women's Budget Group, www.wbg.org.uk.

5. Tronto, J. (1994) *Moral Boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge. Barnes, M (2015) *Ethics of Care*. Policy Press.

6. J.K. Gibson-Graham, (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

7. Sitrin, M and the Colectiva Sembrar, eds (2020) *Pandemic solidarity: mutual aid during the Covid-19 crisis* Pluto Press.. Solnit R. (2016) *Hope in the dark days*. Blackwell.

8. Malik, N. *We Need to Tell New Stories*. W&N.
