

GWEN BURNYEAT. THE FACE OF PEACE: GOVERNMENT PEDAGOGY AMID DISINFORMATION IN COLOMBIA. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS 2022. 320 P. ISBN: 9780226821627

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This book works wonderfully well on a number of levels. On one level, it is a history of a crucial period of recent Colombian history. On another, it is an ethnography of the state and an argument about how the anthropology of the state should be done. At yet another level, it is an argument about Enlightenment values and political liberalism – not based, as is usually done, in philosophical mode, on abstract principles or arguments from an imaginary ‘original position’, but based rather on how the state is embodied and performed in practice.

The face of peace describes a period with numerous echoes and parallels elsewhere, not least in the polarization that resulted from a divisive referendum, which took place just a few months after the Brexit referendum. The parallel is explicitly drawn on a number of occasions. The Colombian Yes campaign was very similar to the UK Remain campaign: both were expected to win, with a fatal complacency on the part of their proponents. Both the Yes and the Remain campaigns were backed by the government of the day, which was caught in the cleft stick of trying to lay out the arguments on both sides, and to treat them as equal, while simultaneously actually favouring one side. In both referendums there was an appeal to facts and figures on one side, and an appeal to emotion, boosted by a large number of false claims, on the other. In both referendums there was a strong perception that the uneducated overwhelmingly favoured No/Leave. Both referendums were seen as a huge failure of communication and education. There is one big difference, however: the Brexit voter turnout was very high at over 72%, with many people who had not voted for years or decades turning out to cast their vote. In Colombia, by contrast, the turnout was only 37.43%. (There are other differences, obviously, in terms of what the referendum was about and the very different histories of the two countries).

This book is an ethnography, not so much (or only partially) of the voters who rejected the Peace accords, nor of the *politicians* who made political capital out of voters’ discomfort with them and of their longstanding distrust of the state, but rather of those people – the NGO workers and civil servants – who tried to persuade the voters to vote Yes. They were often placed in very difficult situations, because they had to be the face of the state or ‘give face’ (*dar la cara*) as they put it, in rural areas, areas which might have been under the control of FARC, or otherwise been neglected by the state, for many years and have little reason to trust it. The anguish and predicament of these often highly motivated, indeed passionate, activists and bureaucrats, and especially their huge disappointment at the No vote in the referendum, are at the heart of the book. Burnyeat’s analysis here, conceptualizing the

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interface between society and the state, is an important contribution to the anthropology of the state and of bureaucracy.

What the activists' efforts showed – as many recent ethnographers of the state have been keen to emphasize – is that the state is a performance. It has to be taken on the road and it has to be ritualized. Even a roadshow about a peace agreement is a performance. In Chapter 4 Burnyeat describes in great detail one such session, held in a rural area called Dabeiba, providing us with a slide-by-slide PowerPoint exposition as delivered by Pilar, the young, urban, educated, middle-class, and very White representative of OACP (*Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz*), sent out to do five presentations to peasant audiences, over the course of four days, of the 'facts' of the agreement. Burnyeat records her own shock that OACP should send such a young interlocutor who was so very different from her target audience. She also honestly records the views of the locals that Pilar, the presenter, was good, that she was exactly what they expected from the state, and that at least some of them were very pleased to learn what Pilar so didactically, and following a narrow and specific script, was sent out to teach them.

Woven into this detailed and compelling ethnography is the wider aim: a critique of liberalism. This means that *The face of peace* is a difficult book – not because it is written abstrusely – far from it. As far as that goes, it is a model of clarity. The book is difficult to read because it turns the gaze onto 'our' too little examined beliefs and assumptions, in quite a harsh, though simultaneously empathetic, way – in fact in just the way that anthropology is supposed to, but rarely does. At least rarely does in a way that makes us truly and deeply uncomfortable.

I say 'our' and 'us' because I would be surprised if the author herself did not share, at least to some degree, the assumptions of the liberal consensus or liberal imaginary. Some of the author's best friends – as the ethnography makes very clear – are liberals, both politically, and in subscribing to what she calls 'cultural liberalism'.

Cultural liberalism believes in the value of education: the solution to bad decision-making, or people believing in propaganda, is more education. Cultural liberalism believes in reason and truth: in the end, reasoned argument and the facts will defeat ignorance, prejudice, and lies. Cultural liberalism believes in the gulf between reason and emotion: appeals to emotion, especially negative emotions and intolerance, must be combatted by appeals to reason, rights, and justice. Cultural liberalism believes in impartiality and neutrality and the possibility of fairness when rules of impartiality are applied. It believes that the liberal settlement – parliamentary democracy, the separation of powers, the rule of law – enacts those values of equality, fairness, justice, and truth. As a corollary of this, it believes that technical solutions are possible. In particular, and in the case we have been discussing, it is possible to keep politics out of neutral presentations of 'the facts' about the peace agreement. Following a well-worn leftist path – but supporting it with deep ethnography – Burnyeat demonstrates that all of these liberal assumptions are myths, just as much as the myths propagated by the anti-peace agreement side. Burnyeat refers to 'the precarity of liberalism's fantasy of rationality' (247) and to the deeply 'ideological' nature of all these liberal assumptions (245). Liberalism in practice has been used as a prop for hierarchies of class and colour. Those propagating the liberal consensus, working for a Yes vote, were overwhelming upper or upper-middle class, sophisticated, from Bogotá, and much Whiter and more educated than those they were attempting to instruct (as well as, in the case described above, younger than them). This kind of 'cultural liberalism' (or what is sneeringly called just 'liberalism' in the USA) is in fact a class attribute and, therefore, a mask for advancing the interests of the elite. As such, it is seen as hypocritical and a No vote (just like a Leave vote in Brexit) is an expression of protest against the elite and a statement of mistrust in the state. Interestingly, Burnyeat demonstrates that – despite the rhetoric of combatting unreasoned

emotion with the facts and the truth – the advocates of peace were just as passionately committed to their cause as their opponents.

In the conclusion Burnyeat quotes Deneen's *Why liberalism failed* saying that the solution to the failure of liberalism is not more liberalism. I must respectfully disagree. I don't actually think there is any alternative. Churchill popularized the saying that 'Democracy is the worst system, except for all the rest'. As Michael Walzer (1995: 25) has said, the project of civil society 'does not make for heroism. "Join the associations of your choice" is not a slogan to rally political militants'. But actually, in a context like Colombia, and many others, civil society is a pretty heroic choice. Looking around the world at protests taking place in Iran and China, I do not believe liberalism has failed; as they used to say about socialism, in too many places liberalism hasn't even been tried.

Bibliography

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