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# **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

## **Introduction**

My idea for this paper began with the phrase ‘gesture politics’. It is a phrase that I have come upon repeatedly in a range of contexts in recent years, across a range of media. My current PhD study, examining the policies and discourses around Personal and Social Education (PSE), has led to me consider the ways in which policy in this area is sometimes more important symbolically than practically – i.e. having wider political aims rather than immediately educative ones. Gesture politics is a phrase that seems to speak to this conceptualisation.

However, once I began a web-search to examine the genealogy of the phrase and examples of its usages, I also discovered the work of Giorgio Agamben and his developing formulation of a ‘politics of gesture’. In his work I found a detailed analysis of the current political system (of which ‘gesture politics’ is a part), and a number of fascinating concepts and questions about the nature of being, the nature of law and of politics and of the nature of exclusion.

As stated in the abstract, this paper examines the two usages – gesture politics and the politics of gesture – and then considers their implications for PSE. As a discussion paper, it is designed to raise questions and stimulate debate. The inchoate nature of Agamben’s formulation of what a politics of gesture might entail, adds to the scope of this debate.

## **Gesture Politics**

As I write in the discussion paper, the popular usage ‘gesture politics’ is not complimentary. The phrase is used, by politicians and the media alike, to deride and

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

dismiss politics and policies and to question the motives of those who make them (see Tempest, 2001 and Ludford, 2003 for examples of this usage). It reflects an increasingly widespread conception of politics as being cynical, empty, manipulative, stage-managed and opportunistic.

### **Analysis of the Usage of ‘Gesture Politics’**

My analysis of the usage of ‘gesture politics’ drew on two key concepts:

1. Discourse as social practice
2. Condensation symbols

#### 1. Discourse as social practice

My understanding of discourse as social practice comes from engagement with the field of discourse analysis and, in particular, the work of Norman Fairclough. Discourse analysts see all discourse, not as an epi-phenomenon, but as social practice in its own right. We are all social actors and we use discourse to accomplish things, from offering blame to make excuses (Gill, 2000, p. 175). Social practice as a concept allows discourse analysis to examine the interaction between social structures and social agency – i.e. to examine societal perspectives and the perspectives of individuals who act within and on those structures (Fairclough, 2003, p. 205).

Gesture politics is part of a discourse and a range of social practices to do with the reality and rhetoric of politics. In using the term, a social actor is drawing on, and being shaped by, discourses of distrust in the motives and machinations of political players and systems.

# Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

## 2. Condensation Symbols

The initial theoretical approach behind my consideration of the purpose of PSE in my PhD, was based on the concept of ‘condensation symbols’, as developed in the work of Murray Edelman and of Doris Graber in political science (Edelman, 1964; D Graber, 1976).

Edelman describes condensation symbols as words and phrases that “evoke the emotions associated” with a situation and:

“condense into one symbolic event, sign or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness: some one of these or all of them” (Edelman, 1964, p. 6).

Without the “check of reality and feedback”, the meaning of a condensation symbol becomes a function of “the psychological needs of the respondents” (Edelman, 1964, p. 7).

Graber argues that condensation symbols are “the most potent, versatile, and effective tools available to politicians for swaying mass publics (Graber, 1976, p. 291). The listener responds to the symbols rather than to the factual content of this type of communication. Symbols allow the listener to categorise information/communication; to respond via reference to their own pre-existing understandings; and to evaluate and attach value-judgements to the information/communication, and to its source. Consequently, she argues, the most powerful condensation symbols are those that can trigger the most intense and instant emotional responses, and that relate to direct and (significantly) to indirect experiences. This rallying function of

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

condensation symbols, to direct and shape social action, she calls “the Pied Piper Phenomenon”.

PSE curriculum documents are a method for Government to reflect, and to be seen to respond to, a range of wide societal concerns. They offer an opportunity to create, enter and shape a range of political and social discourses. The language of PSE is littered with condensation symbols that evoke strong positive and negative responses. Thus PSE curriculum documents can be viewed as an example of the ‘Pied Piper Phenomenon’ in action; their very ambiguity of meaning becomes their key element and the reason for their potency.

The prevalence of condensation symbols amongst the vocabulary of PSE curriculum documents, within both its aims and content, means that anyone can read such a document and in it find a reflection of their own views of the scope, intent and purposes of PSE. Those who seek reassurance that Government is protecting, and championing, ‘traditional values’ will find it. Those who look for signs that Government is committed to education for change, in order to serve a dynamic society will find it. In a phenomenon that has been called as ‘legitimising’ (Vulliamy and Webb 1993, cited in Woods & Wenham, 1995, p. 137), schools and teachers can take from the PSE curriculum documents justification to continue doing what they are already doing. On the scale of the individual classroom, the effect may be to challenge societal norms; on a school or societal scale, however, the trend will be towards conservation of norms and hegemonic expectations (see Apple 2004).

# Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

## The Politics of Gesture

The philosophical usage derives from the work of Agamben (2000). Here gesture is a positive term and ‘the politics of gesture’ is not a description of what is ‘wrong’ with contemporary politics, but is an alternative to it.

It is necessary to examine Agamben’s work in two related sections:

1. Bio-politics
2. The ‘coming community’

### 1. Biopolitics

Agamben’s examination of biopolitics hinges on the key concepts of *homo sacer*, ‘bare life’ and the state of exception.

#### *Homo Sacer*

Agamben’s critical concept of *homo sacer* brings to the fore a significant distinction between ‘bare life’ (*zoe*) and qualified, politicised life (*bios*). Under Roman Law, punishment for certain crimes was to be declared *homo sacer*. A person so declared had their citizenship revoked and was banned from society. Furthermore, they lost the protection of law; they could be killed by anyone but could not be sacrificed in a ritual as their life was considered to be sacred in a negative sense. The *homo sacer* was therefore outside Roman law but still ‘under the spell’ of law (Agamben, 1998)

## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

### *Bare Life*

Agamben defines *homo sacer* as “human life... included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is of its capacity to be killed)” (Agamben 1998, p. 8). The law, therefore, has the power to separate ‘political’ beings (citizens) from ‘bare life’ (bodies). To draw on Aristotle, the law is able to distinguish between man the animal (*zoe* – bare life) and man the citizen (*bios* – qualified life); between a form of life man is born into and one which he achieves through membership of the polis. The existence of *homo sacer* also highlights that as citizens we are two forms of life in one; our politicised form and our bare form.

### *Voice and Language*

For Aristotle, the transition to being able to use language is critical to the formation of a political community and, thus, to the definition of what it is to be human. The human is the ‘talking species’; it is language that distinguishes us from other species and makes the formation of the polis possible. Without language man, like other animals, merely has voice. For Aristotle, voice is the sign of pain and pleasure and is therefore common to all animals, language communicates good and bad, just and unjust and belongs to the realm of man (Agamben, 1998, pp. 7 – 8). Agamben argues that the effect of being reduced to bare life is to have one’s speech reduced to voice (Mills, 2006: 10): speech within the polis can be listened to; voice outside the polis is not.

### *Sovereignty and the State of Exception*

In antiquity, the polis was not an inclusive concept. Membership of the political community was predicated on being male and of being of free status. Outside the

## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

polis (but still part of the economy/society) were various forms of [human] being, such as women, slaves and foreigners. To this could be added the outcast, the *homo sacer*, removed from the polis and placed outside the protection of its laws by the sovereign declaration of a state of exception.

Agamben examines Carl Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as the one who has the power to decide the state of exception (i.e. the state of emergency) and then to suspend the law, without abrogating it, for an indefinite time. The exception is a form of exclusion; a person or group is taken *outside of* the usual rule of law and to kill them is not a crime. "What is captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: *homo sacer...bare life*" (Agamben, 1998, p. 83). The law is not negated in that "[t]he rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it" (Agamben, 1998, p. 18 – original italics).

The sovereign, in declaring a state of exception, also has to stand outside the law in order to suspend its validity (Agamben, 1998, pp. 15 – 16). The sovereign and the excepted bare life, both therefore delineate the limit of the juridical order. This leaves both the subject of biopolitical power (the one under the power/authority of others) and the object of biopolitical power (the management of bare life) at the boundaries of the system. In this space State power is both organised and challenged, and processes focus on the bare life of the citizen (Agamben, 1998, p. 9).

### *Sovereign Power and Modern Biopolitics*

Foucault argued that modern politics was born when sovereign power was usurped by bio-political power:

Olusoga, Y. (2006) **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**. A 7  
paper presented at the PESGB Annual Conference, April 2006, University of  
Oxford.



## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

“For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question”

(Foucault, cited in Agamben, 1998, p. 3).

Agamben differs from Foucault in that he does not accept a distinction between sovereign power and modern biopower. Both, he argues, operate via the exercise of the state of exception, which separates the political being from the living body, and in doing so excludes individuals and groups from the protection of law. Furthermore, in both systems, the polis is not an inclusive concept. Even in the modern politics, and despite mass participation in the democratic process, across gender, class and ethnicity (to varying degrees), people and groups still exist, and can be placed, outside the polis. In an echo of antiquity, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western economies increasingly rely on the labour of excluded communities at the margins of the juridical system – migrant workers and illegal immigrants; people who are part of the economy/society, but who lie outside (or at the margins of) the polis.

Agamben warns that modern democracy has at its heart a fundamental aporia. Its stated aim is concern for, and liberation of, bare life (*zoe*). However, democracy constantly seeks to transform bare life into politicised life (*bios*). For all its championing of human rights, we find in modern biopolitics that they are not associated with bare life, but with politicised life.

This aporia, Agamben argues, leads to “[m]odern democracy’s...gradual convergence with totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies” (Agamben, 1998, p. 10). In the biopolitics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the exception has become the rule. From

## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

the politics of terror to the increasing medicalisation of life (from before conception to beyond the point of death), whole sections of population are placed outside the sphere of *bios*. Forms of life are included in the juridical order solely in the form of their exclusion, in a modern version of *homo sacer*. Examples include political refugees, the victims of the Holocaust, and the ‘enemy combatants’ of Guantanamo Bay – people stripped of their citizenship, becoming mere bodies. Sovereign law enables bio-political administrations to create zones where the application of law is suspended and categories of people have their lives captured. The obvious example of this is the (concentration) camp (Agamben, 1994). The recently exposed practice of extraordinary rendition (the subjection inmates of Guantanamo Bay to disorientating long-distance flights as an interrogation technique), demonstrates how these zones can be made mobile and exported, temporarily, to other countries.

States have come to use the state of exception as a means of removing groups of people beyond the reach and protection of state laws. Ironically, these are the self-same state laws whose breach is identified as the trigger for invoking the state of exception (da Silva, 2005). The response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, Agamben argues, has been to create a “generalization of the state of exception” that makes martial law and emergency powers permanent features (Agamben, 2005). In the state of exception, the rule of law is displaced in response to an emergency and people are “increasingly subject to extra-judicial state violence” (Bull 2004, cited in Agamben, 2004). Agamben writes that:

“the state of exception or state of emergency has become a paradigm of government today”  
(Agamben in interview, Raulff 2004)

## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

### *Nation-states, Citizens and Denizens*

This splitting (of biological life from political life) is particularly evident in the treatment of refugees, as was recognised by Hannah Arendt. Writing about the phenomenon of mass refugees, she argued that:

“The concept of the Rights of man, based on the supposed existence of a human being as such, collapsed in ruins as soon as those who professed it found themselves for the first time before men who had truly lost every other specific quality and connection except for the mere fact of being humans.”

(Arendt 1968, cited in Agamben, 1994, p. 2)

Agamben writes:

“In the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as the rights of the citizens of a state.”

(Agamben, 1994, p. 2)

Human rights depend on civic rights, not the other way around.

The refugee’s identity stems from his exclusion from the law, from his loss of the rights of citizenship and status within the nation-state system. Agamben argues that modern times are characterised by increasing numbers of people in this border category, outside citizen status, for example, asylum-seekers, migrant workers, illegal immigrants. He writes that “industrialized states are faced with... a permanently resident mass of noncitizens” (Agamben, 1994, p. 3), whom Hammar has termed ‘denizens’. Agamben also adds that:

“citizens of the advanced industrialized states (both in the United States and in Europe) manifest, by their growing desertion of the codified instances of political participation, an evident tendency to transform themselves into denizens”

(Agamben, 1994, p. 3)

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

Agamben warns that history teaches us that there are considerable dangers in a situation where migration and assimilation of substantial numbers of people takes place in a society that emphasizes formal differences. He lists “hatred, intolerance, xenophobic reactions and defensive mobilizations” as outcomes of this situation (Agamben, 1994, p. 3).

Agamben sees an embracing of the status of refugee as a way forward to, what he terms, the ‘coming community’. What the refugee represents is the constituent element of the new politics – a form-of-life which exists outside of the nation-state, of nativity and of territoriality, where the concept of *people* can challenge the concept of *nation*, which in the modern bio-politics dominates (Agamben, 1994).

### **2. The Coming Community**

Agamben posits the politics of gesture as an alternative to modern biopolitics. This politics addresses less-than-human, ‘bare’ life. Political inclusion lies not in being linguistically articulate but takes the body, and its capacity for gesture, as its starting point (Bos 2005, p. 37). It questions the principle of birth into a nation-state as the basis for the ascription of civic rights (Agamben, 1994, p. 3).

“The politics of gesture refers to a post-sovereign, non-exclusive, and affirmative politics. It is an anti-humanistic politics as it refuses to acknowledge a special status for human beings or for particular human beings.”

(Bos 2005, p. 42)

The concept of nation, that has dominated bio-politics, gives way to the concept of people. The nation-state is replaced with an aterritorial or extraterritorial space in which all residents are “in a position of exodus or refuge” and “the citizen will have

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is” (Agamben, 1994, p. 4) – i.e. to acknowledge himself as bare life.

### **Implications for Personal and Social Education (PSE)**

Agamben’s depiction of a modern politics that is focussed on containment of ‘non-humanity’ has resonances for education, particularly for PSE. Applying his analysis, it is no coincidence that a surge in political interest in the role of education in promoting social and political literacy has been a feature of Western nation-states in the past decade. There is an historical tendency for states undergoing a period of mass immigration to look to education (particularly civic education) as one of the means of handling and assimilating new populations. Kaestle (cited in Apple, 2004, pp. 63 - 64) identifies, for example, how in 1850s New York, civic education was seen as a means for the State to “Americanise the habits, not the status, of the immigrant”. A continuation of this tendency has been evident in the moves that have introduced Citizenship Education and raised the profile of PSE in the English education system in recent years, at a time when immigration has been high on the political and media agenda.

In Britain, via a range of means including PSE, the State has begun a project of making manifest the previously implicit model for citizenship. This is happening against the backdrop of the continued generalization of the state of exception that accompanies the growing categorisation of sections of the population as being outside the law (as refugee, as inmate, as stateless).

## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

To apply Derrida, in particular his concepts of ‘*differance*’ and of *hierarchization* (on which Agamben draws), is relevant here. It can be argued that to pinpoint the features of qualified, political life, also acts to define and delineate the characteristics that place bare life outside the polis – the signifier generates meaning not by direct correspondence to the signified, but in reference to its conceptual opposite (Butler, 2002, p. 20). Applying this analysis, is Personal and Social Education a prescription against non-humanity (i.e. children are engaged in this curriculum in order to become *bios* and gain entry to the polis)? Is it also a confirmation of the existence of non-humanity (i.e. children and families that lie outside the polis as bare life, act as a conceptually opposing signifier for those who lie within it)?

The debate of recent years, centred on opposing conceptualisations of the child, is also relevant here. The contesting models are the ‘child as being’ versus the ‘child as project’ (Hallden 1991). This raises the question, is the child fully a citizen (and, in Agamben’s, terms a human) of now, or is s/he a future citizen/human moulded towards ‘completion’ by parents, educators and society? Can a child be said to have achieved *bios* or are they as yet outside the polis as *zoe*? Is the role of Personal and Social Education to support the transformation from *zoe* to *bios*, and is this possible for all children - for example, what happens with children who are asylum-seekers?

The curriculum guidance in England locates PSE within Personal, Social, Citizenship and Health Education (DfES, 1999, pp. 136 – 141) in the primary school. The curriculum inculcates children into (to apply Agamben’s analysis) what can be characterised as frameworks of exclusion. It speaks of belonging to communities and specifically orientates children to national and territorial political boundaries,

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

(including, at Key Stage One – 5 to 6 year-olds -, the Commonwealth!). At Key Stage Two (8 to 11 year-olds) children are taught the concept and institutions of democracy that confer human rights on the *citizen*. Alongside this they learn to define anti-social behaviour and about the making and enforcing of laws. Thus their induction to the existing bio-political structures (in particular the concepts of citizen and of nation as opposed to concept of people) is achieved.

However, could Personal and Social Education provide a space to explore the ideas of Agamben's 'coming community'? Could it explore other ways of embracing, within an inclusive community, that which lies outside the polis – i.e. bare life? Could it provide a means of experiencing and sharing that is free from the confines of language?

As an early years' educator I find it particularly interesting that Agamben comes from Italy, which is also the home of Reggio Emilia. After World War II and the existence of a fascist state in Italy, the citizens (an interesting word in this context) of this town decided to set up a unique system of education for their youngest children. Its specific purpose was to create a new generation for whom fascism would be literally unthinkable (Edwards et al, 1993). This decision marks a recognition of what Arendt has called the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963 cited in Yar, 2006), an acknowledgement that evil is not always an act of malevolent will, but is often the result of the mindless following of orders. An education, designed to promote independent thinking, was seen to be the remedy.

## **Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture**

The children of Reggio Emilia were, and are, taught to think for themselves, to question, to solve their own problems, to express themselves creatively and to devise their own curriculum. In these schools, teachers do not instruct, they co-construct and facilitate. Carla Rinaldi, director of Reggio Emilia, stresses that the children are acknowledged as “citizens of today” as opposed to “citizens of the future” (Rinaldi, 2005). This declaration is significant, in that it endows children with human rights by granting them the status of *bios* and declaring them to be already part of the polis at a young age.

The question arises, given Agamben’s analysis of the biopolitics, does any of this ‘inoculate’ these children and their community against fascism? The children are taught to respect the rights of themselves and each other, but this is still within the protection of citizenship. Does the fact that all of this happens within the unquestioned aporia of modern democracy mean that although these children may be taught to be model citizens, they will still as adults, via the state of exception, be able to justify the exclusion of bare life from the reach of law?

### The PSE curriculum in England

The story of where PSE is to be found within the curriculum in England is an interesting one. In the Foundation Stage (3 to 5 year-olds) it is found in Personal, Social and Emotional Development, one of six, equally weighted ‘areas of learning’. In the primary phase (Key Stages One and Two – 6 to 11 year-olds) it is found in the non-statutory guidance within Personal, Social, Citizenship and Health Education; a part of the curriculum can be delivered as discrete lessons, as cross-curricular themes and via the general ethos of the school. In the secondary phase, Citizenship becomes



## Personal and Social Education, Politics and Gesture

a statutory, timetabled subject in its own right, whilst PSE remains as a cross-curricular theme. In the course of the education system PSE, as a focus of learning and teaching, seems to wither on the vine whilst, in contrast, Citizenship Education flourishes.

Reading Agamben's work has reinforced my concern about the current trend regarding the relationship between Personal and Social Education and Citizenship Education. At best, the two can be said to have become increasingly conflated; at worst, Citizenship Education has eclipsed PSE.

Citizenship Education is explicitly concerned with induction into the polis and with the transformation of children from *zoe* to *bios*; it is implicitly a vehicle for promulgating the biopolitics that leaves people and groups exposed to the state of exception.

Personal and Social Education has the potential to provide a space for acknowledgement of bare life, to consider the bare life within each of us and to acknowledge our voice (as opposed to language). To do this however, it needs to be unshackled from the constraints of Citizenship Education.

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