

Electoral guerrilla theatre in the 2015 UK General Election: Critique, legitimacy and incorporation in the news coverage of celebrity election campaigns

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The involvement of celebrities in politics raises issues of legitimacy and representation, and fuels concern over the impact on traditional or conventional political activity. This paper analyses the 2015 UK General Election campaigns of the comedian Al Murray, who stood against UKIP leader Nigel Farage, and the artist Bob and Roberta Smith, who stood in the constituency of Conservative minister Michael Gove. Conceptions of public representation via Nancy Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics are considered, and definitions of celebrity politics are briefly explored. Each of these celebrity candidates displayed elements of theatricality in their campaign techniques, and the paper argues that while the campaigns could be seen as a form of electoral guerrilla theatre, the news coverage of the period leading up to the election suggests that neither campaign provided the kind of critical satirical edge that such a term might suggest. Consequently they were incorporated into the electoral process rather than providing any direct challenge to it.

Key words: general election, electoral guerrilla theatre, celebrity politics, Al Murray, Bob and Roberta Smith

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to consider a particular aspect of the election – the media coverage of the celebrity campaigns run by comedian Al Murray and artist Bob and Roberta Smith – in the context of a number of theoretical conceptions. Firstly, they can be seen as celebrities engaging in political activity, raising questions and concerns over the legitimacy of high profile individuals' attempts to engage in politics. Secondly, the issue of representation – on behalf of whom are the candidates standing and what social constituencies do they represent?

– can be considered in terms of a civil society/public sphere model, and in particular via Nancy Fraser’s concept of the subaltern counterpublic (1993).

Thirdly, given the candidates’ backgrounds in entertainment and arts-based protests, can these campaigns be understood as examples of electoral guerrilla theatre, challenging the political – and electoral – *status quo* via satirically charged events and activities? Were these campaigns radical, progressive interventions, or were they incorporated into the conventions of electoral political activity? The news coverage of these campaigns provides a window into the ways in which they were understood and represented by the media: on the one hand they represent a potential threat to the election structures which to some extent the media rely on throughout the campaign, and more specifically to the ideological positions of many of the mainstream newspapers; on the other hand, the entertainment factor evident in celebrity engagement with politics could be seen as welcome to news outlets already in thrall to celebrity.

Celebrity politics, political celebrities

The interaction between politics and celebrity has generated a good deal of discussion and concern in contemporary political analysis. Douglas Kellner, for instance, has argued, following Guy Debord’s *Society of the spectacle* (1967), that the public have come to see politics as a form of entertainment in which they are ‘submissively consuming spectacles’ rather than actively engaging in politics. For Kellner, media spectacle prescribes a culture of manufactured celebrity across every major social domain, including politics (Kellner 2003: 3, 5). Ralph Negrine similarly see politicians in the ‘age of television’ as being aware of the need to be ‘part-politician, part-celebrity’ (Negrine 2008: 139).

John Street suggests that a key aspect of the criticism is that celebrity politics ‘undermines any claim to representativeness’ by focusing on ‘irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances’; this argument rests on ‘familiar distinctions between the trivial (entertainment) and the serious (politics), and a concern about the infection of the second by the first’ (Street 2004: 439).

The celebrity politician (CP) has been analysed by Street as comprising two distinct variants. The politician who uses the tropes and artefacts of celebrity culture to enhance their image, or the celebrity whose background in entertainment leads to elected office, are what Street labels

as CP1s. The second variant refers to those celebrities who use their visibility and status as means to publicise and support particular political causes and influence political outcomes. This might involve making speeches, attending conferences and protest marches, and other forms of activism. Crucially however, for our discussion, these CP2s engage in what might be understood as civil society politics ‘without seeking or acquiring elected office’ (Street 2004: 438). Examples in the UK include singer Charlotte Church and comedian Russell Brand¹; both of these celebrities have made public intervention in political issues, but neither has sought any formal political position (with Brand at one point rejecting the political system as a whole before endorsing the Labour Party leader Ed Miliband (*Huffington Post* 2015)). This is an important point, because it suggests a gap in this analytical framework.

While CP1s include celebrities that then become elected politicians, these are usually elected via established party politics: Street mentions Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronald Reagan in the US, and Sebastian Coe in the UK, to illustrate the category, all of whom achieved political office via mainstream political party structures. Other examples are linked in their political activities to established parties (Clint Eastwood and the Republican Party) or gained office as a candidate for a previously existing ‘third party’ (Jesse Ventura and Ross Perot’s Reform Party) (West and Orman 2003: 64). The campaigns discussed here are, by contrast, not via established parties, nor are they in practical terms intended to lead to office, so cannot be easily classified as CP1s; but by engaging in the formal electoral process, they can be argued in a technical sense to be ‘seeking’ public office and, therefore, do not quite fall within the CP2 category. They are celebrities, but they are also political outsiders. This paradoxical position – of formally standing for office with no intention of taking up that position – is, in fact, a crucial element of what Bogad describes as electoral guerrilla theatre (2005).

Electoral guerrilla theatre

In his book *Electoral guerrilla theatre* (ibid), Lawrence M. Bogad begins by describing the documentary maker Michael Moore’s campaign to get a potted plant elected to the US Congress, on the platform that in creating oxygen for humans to breathe, the ficus was at least as useful as the incumbent (and unopposed) member of Congress. Bogad sees the satirical electoral campaign as a relatively recent phenomenon, most often undertaken by representatives of disempowered or marginalised social groups (ibid: 2). Electoral guerrilla theatre is, therefore, a contradictory concept in that it involves both a conventional political

route to change via electoral campaigning whilst also emerging from those who are marginalised and criticising the *status quo* in a tactical, 'hit-and-run' manner:

Electoral guerrilla theatre is an ambivalent hybrid measure that merges the traditions and techniques of 'third party' electoral intervention with grassroots direct action and performative disruption (ibid: 3).

A further key example for Bogad is the campaign that Pauline Pantsdown ran against Pauline Hanson, who was the far right One Nation party candidate for the Australian Senate in 1998. Hanson was a working class single mother who had been previously expelled from the (right-wing) Liberal Party for anti-Aboriginal comments but was, nevertheless, elected as MP for the Oxley constituency in the suburbs of Brisbane. She founded the One Nation party in 1997, and in 2003 she was exonerated following a conviction for electoral fraud. After a period away, she is now the leader of the party, which campaigns against multiculturalism, immigration, Aboriginal rights and 'political correctness'.²

Pantsdown was the character created by performance artist Simon Hunt, and she protested against Hanson's anti-aboriginal and anti-Asian cultural racism by mocking her party's bigotry. In particular, Pantsdown edited together clips from Hanson's speeches, rearranging them to mock and satirise her politics. The video for 'I don't like it', for instance, has Pantsdown lip-synching to Hanson's words:

I don't like it, when you turn my voice about
I don't like it, when you vote One Nation out
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 racist, rubbish, racist hate.
Please explain, why can't my blood be coloured white
I should talk to some medical doctors, coloured blood is just not right
(Pauline Pantsdown 1998)

Another 'mash up' of Hanson's speeches made by Pantsdown became the subject of successful legal action for defamation; the song again used Hanson's own edited words to make sexual innuendos and voice (implicitly satirical) anti-gay rhetoric (Bogad 2005: 176). A key question for Bogad is how these performances relate to the 'respectable' or traditional forms of campaigning and electioneering that they seek to mock. Are the former seen as a

legitimate form of political contestation, or an indulgent or cynical expression of disillusion? Does this kind of campaign provide a valid expression of political concern or do they merely provide a pointless if entertaining diversion from 'real' political activity?

We may also ask whether electoral guerrilla theatre can work in favour of establishment politics by providing a harmless entertainment which channels and diffuses legitimate political anger. The near oxymoronic term 'electoral guerrilla' suggests a contradiction, and the extent to which any campaign can work within formal electoral structures whilst also being a disruptive, resistant, guerrilla activity is central to the debate.

Bogad notes that winning is not the main goal; the intention is often to simultaneously deride and shame one group (the formal established political actors and institutions) while enthusing and organising activists and supporters (ibid: 4). This position, therefore, differentiates these electoral guerrillas from both of Street's CP1 and CP2 categories. The irony involved in these performances is aimed at those who, having previously experienced the frustrations of the 'system', are predisposed to the mocking of 'serious' politics and, therefore, 'get the joke', with the hope that it might also reach a more mainstream audience (ibid: 4). Elections provide a useful environment for satirical activity due to their formal structure, their public familiarity and the economical access they provide to mainstream media and thus to a wider audience than candidates might otherwise reach.

Bogad emphasises the importance of understanding the formal electoral structures, in terms of voting systems and institutional arrangements, within which specific examples must be understood as working (ibid: 7). His detailed case studies focus on examples from 1970s Amsterdam, the 1992 US presidential campaign and Australian parliamentary elections in 1998, but he suggests the UK's Monster Raving Loony Party as an example of the 'patently irreverent parties' he is discussing.

As Bogad notes, critics – often conventional politicians – have derided guerrilla campaigns as a frivolous waste of time and resources, an insult to the solemnity of electoral democracy in action, and this has even provoked attempts to legally restrict or limit such campaigns. These criticisms from elected and established politicians raise questions about the legitimacy of electoral guerrilla campaigns, most particularly in terms of contesting the extent to which they represent a constituency. Bogad argues that such campaigns can be seen as tactical hit

and run strikes from disenfranchised sections of society, and enlists Nancy Fraser's conception of subaltern counterpublics in this regard (ibid: 6).

Publics and counterpublics

Fraser's argument is built on a critique of 'actually existing democracy', and more specifically of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, in which 'participants in public conversation ... come to a consensus about the great issues of the day through the force of rational argument' (Edwards 2004: 57). While Habermas located a limited historical version of this in the salons and coffee houses of 18th century Europe, the democratic normative ideal has been subjected to a range of criticisms, not least that in suggesting a single, liberal public sphere, it ignores, both in historical and contemporary terms, the range of competing spheres, public arenas and social spaces within which political and ideological debate routinely takes place and excludes a range of public voices. For instance, the 'masculinist' nature of the bourgeois public sphere in which the female-friendly salon culture of republican France was deemed 'aristocratic' and 'effeminate' led to the exclusion of women in public debate (Fraser 1993: 114). Fraser argues that there were, and are 'nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics' which exist alongside the liberal bourgeois public sphere emphasised by Habermas (ibid: 116).

These counterpublics, Fraser argues, continuously contested the 'exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public' by offering alternative political and discursive approaches. The relative social weakness of these publics renders them subaltern compared with, for instance, the sovereign parliament 'whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making' via law-making positions it as a strong public (ibid: 134). The subaltern counterpublic represents a social space in which the disempowered and marginalised can debate and define their needs and interests. Bogard, therefore, suggests that electoral guerrilla activity can in one sense be seen as an expression of such interests, projected into the formal mainstream of the liberal public sphere (op cit: 18).

The term 'civil society' can similarly be applied in the context of a critique of 'actually existing democracy' in that it emphasises the 'active participation on the part of citizens in egalitarian institutions and civil associations as well as in politically relevant organisations' (Cohen and Arato 1992: 19). In this view social movements – of which electoral guerrillas are a key part – are an important feature of civil society and citizen participation (ibid:19).

Electoral guerrilla theatre can, therefore, be seen as the legitimate exercise of democratic rights emerging from subaltern counterpublics establishing an opposition either to other 'strong' publics and their domination of electoral politics, or indeed opposition to the structures of electoral politics themselves.

In order to consider how these arguments apply to our case studies here, we need to clarify the contexts of the two electoral interventions represented by comedian Al Murray as the 'pub landlord', and the artist Patrick Brill who works using the pseudonym Bob and Roberta Smith. We will then be able to consider the response to these campaigns in the media coverage they generated.

The Pub Landlord: 'Glass of white wine for the lady'

Al Murray is a British comedian who is widely known via his alter ego, the Pub Landlord. In this character, Murray plays an archetypal brash English xenophobic nationalist with exaggeratedly traditional and socially conservative views. The catchphrase '...and a glass of white wine for the lady' illustrates, for instance, the character's outdated gender politics, and such views are satirised in a way which is arguably ambiguous.

In January 2015, Murray announced that he was to run as a candidate in the general election in the constituency of South Thanet in Kent, which was held by the Labour Party from 1997 to 2010 but was then held by a Conservative MP. Murray chose the constituency because it had also been chosen by Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) for his attempt to enter parliament. Farage's political persona could be seen as echoing that of the Pub Landlord in its beer drinking, 'common sense' espousing English nationalism. Murray's campaign was immediately understood as a satirical challenge to Farage and UKIP; Murray's Free United Kingdom Party (FUKP) used an inverted pound sign in a clear reference to the UKIP logo, and coverage of the launch of the campaign was immediately reported as a challenge to Farage, even though the constituency was held by the Conservatives.

The FUKP manifesto listed a number of policies around issues of particular concern to UKIP, including employing Polish workers to 'brick up' the Channel Tunnel, leaving the EU before leaving the solar system, and (because unemployment causes crime) locking up the unemployed.

The theatrical element of the campaign resided primarily in the gap between Murray the comedian and his Pub Landlord alter ego. The distance between the two is evident in the contrast between Murray's aristocratic, public school background – he is reportedly a descendent of the Duke of Atholl and a distant relative of Conservative MP Sir Edward Leigh – and the working class cockney Pub Landlord. Murray's campaign, therefore, implicitly highlighted the constructed nature of political, and electoral, politics; all politicians are playing characters, adopting positions, acting.

Bob and Roberta Smith: 'All schools should be art schools'

Patrick Brill makes art under the pseudonym of Bob and Roberta Smith, and much of his work involves painted signs with slogans commenting on politics and popular culture. In a Tate Gallery-sponsored YouTube clip introducing his work, Smith describes his interest in signage by describing his artworks as 'props in a performance' in which the audience is invited to consider whether to act on the exhortations of the words they contain (Tate n.d.). In another clip – a trailer for his new film, *Make your own damn art*, he suggests that his attitude to political campaigning is 'slightly disingenuous' in that he does wish to see change in the world but is also aware that the political sphere is 'all nonsense' (Rogers n.d.). Smith has been involved in a number of political campaigns which have involved promoting the importance of art and creativity, and also plays guitar in the band, the Ken Ardley Playboys. In 2013 he organised the Art Party conference in Scarborough which was a response to the then coalition government's plans to 'sideline' art education in schools (BBC News 2013). Smith can therefore also be seen as a performer, adopting both a persona and a political stance.

The platform which Smith stood on consisted in large part of an assertion of the importance of art education in general, and in particular with regard to recent changes in the school curriculum reducing the overall importance of art.

Coverage, electoral theatre and serious politics

One of the key concerns for this study is the extent to which Murray and Smith were criticised as celebrities intent on self-promotion at the expense of 'serious' politics. Murray, in particular, was subject to attack from this perspective. During a press conference to launch his campaign held in a pub in the South Thanet constituency, Murray made a speech about democracy which was interrupted by a fellow minority party candidate challenging his

legitimacy. In front of a large contingent of the UK media, including newspaper and television journalists, the Reality Party candidate, Nigel Askew, asked Murray why he was ‘making a mockery of Thanet’ and demanded that Murray state his ‘real intentions’ in standing. Askew emphasised that he was a ‘real’ pub landlord, and asked if the campaign was ‘all about [Murray’s] career’. Murray responded by emphasising that the campaign was about getting people to vote in the election – implicitly, therefore, suggesting an emphasis on electoral participation in liberal democracy.³

Similarly, Smith had previously been involved in the ‘vote art’ campaign which was organised by the Art Fund charity which works to promote and support museums and art galleries. The campaign was based around a number of artworks – all urging the public to vote – which were placed on 100 billboard sites around the country. The explicit intention to ‘encourage people to vote’ (Vote Art n.d.) again suggests that Smith, like Murray, saw his campaign as promoting political engagement at least as part of the more specific aims suggested above.

The initial response to Murray’s campaign in Thanet was mixed; the outgoing Conservative MP, Laura Sandys, was quoted in a number of news outlets as saying that ‘we have enough comedians standing already that we don’t need another one’ while acknowledging that he might represent some ‘light relief’ for voters (Press Association, 14 January 2015). The *Guardian* acknowledged this ambivalence by suggesting that rival candidates ‘could do little else but claim to be entertained’ (*Guardian*, 14 January 2015). Murray had planned to parachute into the constituency as a stunt, but made the most of the publicity gained when the stunt had to be cancelled as he was considered too overweight to attempt the jump. He announced to the press that he was the victim of ‘health and safety gone mad’, spoofing UKIP’s concerns over EU inspired regulation (*Observer*, 15 March 2015).

While Farage had initially accepted Murray’s involvement (‘the more the merrier’), he was later quoted as suggesting that the campaign was ‘patronising’ voters:

‘He’s really laughing at them and I think the joke is starting to wear a bit thin. I don’t think the failure to parachute is the relevant bit. His failure to answer the question as to why he is here and what he is doing is more important’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 16 March 2015).

‘If he stood as himself and said: “I’m really very posh. I think you’re filthy, common people and you should laugh at my comedy act,” he might get a few more votes. People are taking it as an insult. They feel he is taking the piss out of them’ (*Sunday Times*, 5 April 2015).

The implicit point here is the frivolousness of Murray’s campaign, and the need to return to a more serious politics; Murrays’ campaign was an insult to voters and implicitly an insult to the UK electoral system more generally.

One of the key points of contention for critics of Murray was the contrast between the working class pub landlord and Murray’s public school upbringing. The *Independent* noted a *Times* diary comment that ‘Murray (Bedford School) is standing against Nigel Farage (Dulwich College). Really shaking up the establishment’ (*Independent*, 15 January 2015). Murray was often referred to as ‘Oxford educated’ (*Daily Star*, 4 February 2015; *East Anglia Daily Times*, 3 March 2015; *Mirror*, 13 March 2015), and an *Express* feature, headlined ‘A very posh Pub Landlord’, described in some detail Murray’s aristocratic heritage as the direct descendant of the 3rd Duke of Atholl.⁴

The truth is that the baldheaded, beer-bellied, foul-mouthed Cockney landlord that we see on our TV screens is a world away from Alistair James Hay Murray, the well-spoken, public school-educated intellectual who is more often seen with a cup of Earl Grey rather than a pint of London Pride (*Express*, 5 February 2015).

This article was not explicitly critical of Murray, and set out the apparent contrasts relatively dispassionately; others, however, were more damning. Columnist Rod Liddle in the *Sun* explained how the election was ‘one of the most important in our lifetimes’ and argued Murray’s joke policies were ‘incredibly unfunny’. He then suggested that ‘In real life, Al’s another public school-educated (very) posh boy liberal Leftie’, and told Murray to ‘clear off and go home’ (Liddle, *Sun*, 5 February 2015). Liddle’s criticism is not so much that Murray’s Pub Landlord character represents an attempt to mislead the electorate, but that politics is a serious business that has no place for (bad) jokes.

A more sophisticated criticism of Murray’s campaign argued that it might drain votes from the parties opposed to UKIP, by positioning Murray as the ‘anti-UKIP’ candidate. ‘And if

that happens the only real winner is Farage himself – and, of course, Murray, who has staged a superb PR coup’ (*Kentish Gazette*, 5 February 2015). In the *Guardian*, a report on the South Thanet election acknowledged that while some might enjoy the satirising of Farage and UKIP, Murray might ...

...further dilute the vote in an area of high deprivation, desperately in need of politicians who actually care. Murray is clearly all about Murray, his pint-toting, ‘British moon on a stick’ shtick a parody of Ukip’s main man (*Guardian*, 28 March 2015).

Again there are two issues here, the first being that a ‘comedy candidate’ can potentially cause damage to the proper business of elections. The second is a linked criticism regarding Murray’s ‘PR coup’ which is a pejorative swipe at the promotional aspects of his campaign. Certainly the reviews of his stand-up comedy during the campaign referred to his electoral activities, suggesting that it was providing a useful advertising boost (*East Anglia Daily Times*, 3 March 2015). By contrast, a columnist for the *Independent* argued that the Pub Landlord might take away votes from UKIP as he is ‘appealing to the same anti-politics crowd as Farage’s strand of stop-the-world conservatism’ (*Independent*, 6 April 2015). While this was an unusual perspective, it nevertheless shares a similar concern with those who see Murray as helping rather than hindering UKIP – that it is a negative (‘anti-politics’) influence on the important business of elections.

Elsewhere, however, much of the coverage was receptive to the Pub Landlord’s manifesto (a ‘brilliantly bonkers satire’) (*Guardian*, 16 January 2015), seeing Murray as part of an ‘honourable tradition of protest politics’ (*Independent*, 16 January 2015). Many newspapers seemed to enjoy the knockabout humour of the Pub Landlord (*Daily Mail*, 14 January 2015; *Daily Star*, 14 January 2015; *Daily Star*, 16 January 2015).

The coverage of Bob and Roberta Smith standing against Michael Gove was more limited, not least due to the relative seriousness of the issues and the tone of Smith’s campaign. Much of it was largely positive (*Independent*, 3 December 2014; *Evening Standard*, 14 April 2015), with one supportive comment piece imploring Smith to ‘avoid gesture politics’ and draw up a ‘sophisticated manifesto’ which details the ‘real casualties’ of cuts to arts funding (*Independent* 5 December 2014). This illustrates the evident support for Smith’s campaign,

but can also be seen as a request to play within the rules of formal mainstream politics. The fear of ‘gestures’ clearly militates against the kind of irony and satire that are part of electoral guerrilla theatre. Smith suggests that while his appearance and some of his campaign materials were ‘zany’, his candidacy was received seriously, and indeed positively by many people in the constituency and outside.

I have the accoutrements of the Raving Loony Party, because ... I do dress in a slightly mad way ... but I was trying to flag up this one issue of arts in schools (personal interview, 3 September 2015).

In particular, he noted that Conservative councillors privately agreed with his arguments, and that this would not have been the case with a more overtly satirical approach. This suggests that there was an emphasis on, and public understanding of, a clear policy message – unlike Al Murray’s more ambiguous spoofing of UKIP. *The Times* noted that Gove seemed unconcerned about the challenge from Smith:

Gove responds cordially to Bob’s provocations. ‘I enjoy his work and look forward to discussing with him the renaissance in creative and cultural education under this government,’ he says (*Times*, 10 April 2015).

This, of course, needs to be understood in the context of the safety of Gove’s seat – the Conservative candidate has achieved a 50 to 60 per cent share of the vote since its creation in 1997 (BBC News, 2001); Gove could afford to be magnanimous about Smith’s intervention.

Niche media coverage – primarily in arts magazines and websites – was unsurprisingly supportive of Smith’s campaign. One news website noted Smith’s activism in campaigning against cuts to the arts (a-n, 2015), while another presented him as a ‘vociferous critic’ who in the unlikely event of victory, would be a ‘vocal advocate [for the arts] in the House of Commons’ (*Apollo* magazine 2015). A *Time Out* interview compared the ‘engagingly quirky’ Smith with Al Murray’s South Thanet campaign by suggesting the former at least ‘has a serious point to make’ (*Time Out* 2015).

Discussion: Disruption, irony and incorporation

Celebrity political activity can be criticised from at least two different directions: either that they lack seriousness, and are simply protesting from the sidelines without the conviction to get involved, or that they are a serious threat to ‘real’ (non-celebrity) politics. While the former criticism can clearly be aimed at the kinds of protesting celebrity (such as Charlotte Church) who do not put themselves up for election, those that do stand for public office are perhaps more likely to be challenged on the basis of the latter criticism. In the case of Al Murray, we can see some minor evidence of this latter concern in relation to the effect the Pub Landlord’s votes might have on the possibility of Nigel Farage becoming an MP. Nevertheless, overall, and certainly with regard to Bob and Roberta Smith, there is relatively little criticism of either kind, and I would argue this is because these candidates did not fit in to the categories of celebrity politics as discussed by Street – they were not CP1s who were ever likely to gain office (unlike, for instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sebastian Coe), but nor were they CP2s, using their status to shout from the sidelines without any formal involvement. The limited position of standing while being destined for defeat meant that the campaigns could to some extent be seen as tactical in avoiding these criticisms, but it might also be argued to limit their own critical edge.

It would be possible to see Smith’s campaign as reflecting the interests of what Fraser sees as a counterpublic, in that he brings to the wider public the concerns and interests of a particular section of society, articulating an alternative discourse (around the value of arts funding and education). Clearly, however, a key difficulty here is the extent to which this public can be understood as disempowered or disenfranchised. The liberal, middle class ‘arts community’ in a neoliberal democracy is likely to be marginalised in the drive for economic efficiency and public cost-cutting, but it also has a relatively privileged position in cultural terms and, therefore, the ability to engage via the media with a mainstream audience. This suggests that this particular counterpublic could not legitimately be understood as subaltern in Fraser’s sense. The Pub Landlord in some respects might – potentially at least – more clearly be articulating the perspectives of a working class public routinely excluded from the bourgeois public sphere by satirising a party and a party leader (UKIP and Farage) whose reactionary policies have been (unfairly) valorised and legitimated by the mainstream media as reflecting working class values. Again however, this argument is weak, this time because Murray’s intentions, and the power of any ironic or satirical critique, were undermined by an ambiguity in the delivery of the campaign.

Bogad notes that irony occurs ‘within the space between ironist and audience’, with the audience’s interpretive agency militating against any certainty as to how the message might be received (Bogad 2005: 36-37). Unintended interpretations of the Pub Landlord’s intentions (mocking the constituency and its inhabitants? promoting a stand-up comedy career? encouraging people to vote?) meant that any critique of Farage’s xenophobic nationalism struggled to emerge.

In addition to this, I would argue that both campaigns ceded too much to the *electoral* to be considered as guerrilla theatre. Both Smith and Murray suggested in more or less explicit terms that a key part of their campaigns was to encourage people to vote. This assertion of the importance of voting as an expression of liberal democracy blunts any ‘guerrilla’ style critical resistance the campaigns might otherwise have evinced; while Bogad sees electoral guerrilla theatre as an attempt to destabilise and question the structures, as well as the outcomes of elections, the campaigns discussed here worked within rather than against the mainstream of political engagement.

Rod Liddle’s criticism, in defending the ‘serious’ business of politics, represented an implicit acknowledgement of the potential for campaigns such as Smith and Murray’s to become electoral guerrilla theatre in the sense that Bogad argues – a carnivalesque challenge to the pompous sanctity of politics as usual. However, I would argue that the limitations set out above meant this was unlikely to emerge.

Conclusion

There was some support for both Smith and Murray from a *Times* article which argued that ‘If they get people talking about politics, when millions say they are fed up with bland platitudes, that can't be a bad thing’ (*Times*, 10 April 2015). This takes the two campaigns at their word – that they were above all intended to persuade the public to get involved in the election. Tim Stanley, in the *Spectator*, applauded the fringe candidates who represented ‘the best of British bloody-mindedness’, suggesting that the sharing of the election night platform with “‘serious” politicians’ was a ‘necessary corrective to their oversized egos’ (*Spectator*, 11 April 2015). Celebrity politics from this perspective need not be seen as an unnecessary distraction from the importance business of serious politics, but as a welcome addition to the election process. However, the extent to which Murray and Smith’s campaigns were accepted as legitimate is, I would argue, a measure of their failure in terms of the disruptive, ‘hit-and-

run' tactics of electoral guerrilla theatre. The campaigns of Pauline Pantsdown and Michael Moore's ficus plant provide a contrast in their pointed challenge to discredited politicians and electoral systems. This is not to say that the campaigns should be seen as failing on their own terms; each could be argued to have achieved whatever goals each candidate set themselves. Certainly Murray could argue that his spoofing of Farage's persona and policies was a small part of the reasons for his ultimate defeat, and others might suggest his profile as a comedian was enhanced; similarly, Smith might argue that his campaign raised awareness of the issues in a way that would not have been available to him at any other time, and laid the groundwork for a continued opposition to cuts in arts education. Nevertheless, in the terms set out by Bogad, the radical performative aspects of electoral guerrilla theatre were not realised.

Therefore, while there was some criticism of the two campaigns discussed here, particularly regarding Al Murray, overall there was an acceptance in the media of their electoral activities as part of an eccentric but essentially harmless sideshow to the 'real' issues. The calm response of Michael Gove to Bob and Roberta Smith's campaign suggests that such incursions can be safely managed; any radical critique that might have been generated through electoral guerrilla theatre was blunted and ultimately absorbed and incorporated into the mainstream electoral process.

Notes

¹ Brand's refusal to vote in the election because the political system 'served the needs of corporations' rather than the people (BBC News 2015), could perhaps be seen as the kind of disruptive approach suggested by Bogad; however, his refusal to engage in the electoral system – even in order to satirise it – means he cannot be considered as representing any kind of electoral guerrilla theatre in Bogad's terms

² About | Pauline Hanson's One Nation (n.d.). Available online at <http://www.onenation.com.au/about>, accessed on 13 November 2015

³ See <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/real-pub-landlord-crashes-al-5329192>, accessed on 7 December 2015

⁴ A colleague has suggested that the simple noting of Murray's Oxford education could be read as an acknowledgement of his intellectual credentials and, therefore, his fitness for public office. However, given the ambiguity of his campaigning persona (taking on the Pub Landlord's bluff reactionary agenda) and the way it has elsewhere been used explicitly to

suggest hypocrisy, it seems to represent at best a reminder of the contrast between actor and role, if not an implicit critique of Murray's disingenuousness

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