

Narrative, nation and classrooms

Britishness revisited

A talk by Robin Richardson at the University of Birmingham, March 2015

Secret reservoir of values

'Stories,' Ben Okri has observed, 'are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.' He continues: 'Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.'

Stories, whether lies or truths, and whether about nations or about individuals, have political addresses – they are to do with maintaining or challenging and changing the status quo, the distribution of power, they are to do with freedom, with flowering, flourishing.

Referring to his documentary film *Bitter Lake* about recent world history, Adam Curtis remarks that 'politicians used to have the confidence to tell stories that made sense of the chaos of world events. But now there are no big stories and politicians react randomly to every new crisis, leaving us bewildered and disorientated, and journalism – that used to tell a grand, unfurling narrative – now also just relays disjointed and often wildly contradictory fragments of information. Events come and go like waves of a fever. We – and the journalists – live in a state of continual delirium, constantly waiting for the next news event to loom out of the fog and then disappear again, unexplained.'

Events that come and go like waves of a fever in a state of continual delirium are so much ODTAA, one damn thing after another. Even ODTAA narratives, though, chime with or challenge certain material interests and therefore have political addresses. Frequently, for example, they conveniently imply that the most plausible explanation for an event, or even the only explanation for an event, is

that it's caused by pure evil, in other words by 'people who hate us'. There's a war on between good and evil, namely between us-equals-good and them-equals-evil, and we should trust our political leaders to fight evil in any way they think fit. 'We don't negotiate with evil,' said Dick Cheney, 'we defeat it'. Bitter Lake, says Curtis, is 'a counterpoint to the 'thin, narrow and increasingly destructive stories told by those in power today'.

What sort of stories about the nation should we be telling the young? The brief remarks from Okri and Curtis suggest some preliminary ways of answering. Stories should be explanatory, not about ODTAA; nuanced, not about good versus evil or us versus them; and should face unpalatable truths not peddle consoling lies. If they are none of these things they will be merely 'thin, narrow and increasingly destructive ... told by those in power'. Alas, there are stories currently being told in Britain's classrooms – more precisely, in England's classrooms – that are thin, narrow and destructive. The purveyors of these stories include the secretary of state for education and her colleagues in the Cabinet; the opposition spokesperson for education and his colleagues in the shadow cabinet; Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Schools and his senior colleagues at Ofsted; and, judging by their schools' websites, quite a lot of headteachers. Thin and narrow stories are destructive for the children who do not get characterised as White British in censuses. They are destructive for millions on millions of White British pupils, too. At the present time they are central in the government project known as 'fundamental British values', FBV for short.

The FBV project

The FBV project in education was announced on Monday 9 June 2014 within a speech by Michael Gove about the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham. Its origins, however, go back in time much further than that. Trojan Horse was a catalyst or trigger for FBV, but not the cause. It is nevertheless relevant to revisit the Trojan Horse story, for it was the story of a gift horse – equus donatus troianus – and to understand the origins and features of FBV requires consideration of who the people were who welcomed the gift, and why they did not look it in the mouth, let alone study the dental records.

A lie, it has been said, can be half way round the world before the truth has put its boots on. A lie travels particularly fast, without even cursory checking let alone dutiful scrutiny, when it reflects and reinforces fantasies and ignorance which already exist. The fake document known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, for example, was widely accepted at face value in its day because it accorded with antisemitic conspiracy theories which were already prevalent. Further, a lie gets easy passage when it gives emotional energy, or can readily be used to give such energy, to a pre-existing programme or agenda. Thus the Trojan Horse forgery in Birmingham not only reflected Islamophobic tropes, fantasies and simplicities which already existed but also acted as a gift horse for certain pre-existing agendas and interests. The grateful recipients of the gift in this respect included an axis of three principal and overlapping and mutually reinforcing groups, creating between them high levels of synergy:

a) Assimilationists, aka island storytellers.

They are disturbed by and opposed to multiculturalism, antiracism and political correctness, and wish to promote a cohesive society by returning to, as they see it, a single grand narrative about British identity and about 'our island story'. The voices of these people have been influential in the education system at least since the days of the New Right and the Salusbury Review in the 1980s, and in society more generally for at least 100 years since the Aliens Act 1905.

b) The Islamophobia industry

This is a loose network of think tanks, journalists, funding organisations and right-wing politicians in western countries who in domestic affairs seek to justify patterns of inequality that perpetuate the disadvantage and exclusion of Muslim communities and neighbourhoods and that in foreign affairs seek to justify western policies in the Middle East, including Israel/Palestine.

c) Securocrats

These are civil servants, think tanks, intelligence services and surveillance agencies seeking recognition and additional resources for their operations, and for their theories about the nature and causes of extremism and radicalisation, and about how to deal with these 'upstream' – or, in different words, about 'what goes on before the bomb goes off'.

It was securocrats engaged in counter-terrorism operations, not educationists concerned with teaching and learning, who coined the term FBV. They did so within what they claimed was a definition of extremism. The purpose of the definition was to explain how they would decide whether or not to talk to, work with and give funds to Muslim organisations and groups. It was based on the theory that the root cause of terrorist acts perpetrated by people of Muslim heritage is the ideology or narrative known as Islamism. Islamists are not, securocrats concede, necessarily criminals. They are, however, 'non-violent extremists'. In a well-known metaphor, they are to criminals what swamps are to crocodiles and mosquitoes – they are a conducive environment. All Muslims are assumed by securocrats to be part of the swamp, part of the suspect community in which criminal terrorists hide and thrive. Securocrats not only coined the actual term FBV, as outlined above, but also devised the new counter-terrorism and security requirements which come into force this summer and which have far-reaching implications for universities and schools (including nursery schools!), and which complement and reinforce the FBV agenda. The worldview of securocrats is endorsed by the government, and alas not challenged by the opposition. It is both wrong and counter-productive.

These three sets of interests were not the only ones which benefited from the equus donatus troianus. They are particularly relevant and pernicious, however, in relation to FBV. For the record, other beneficiaries of the gift include the sections of the media that prosper and profit from peddling moral panics about plots, threats and dangers; politicians of all parties seeking to demonstrate, in the run-up to the 2015 general election, that they can reliably be more negative than any of their rivals towards immigration in general and Muslims and Islam in particular; participants in arguments for and against the academisation of schools; people involved in employment disputes, or else wanting to settle old scores from disputes in the past; officials and elected members in central and local government; and people involved in rivalries and contests between denominations, schools of thought and theological traditions within British Islam, for example between the Barelwi and Deobandi traditions, and between different takes on modernity.

Be that as it all may, it is the axis of a) island storytellers, b) the Islamophobia industry and c) securocrats, and the synergy amongst these three, that provides

the principal impetus and energy behind FBV. The axis has caused, is causing and will cause much damage in the education system. Much critical, corrective and restorative work needs now therefore to be done.

Restoration

For restorative work to be effective there needs to be substantial discussion and clarification through dialogue, and this has to be bottom-upwards from young people and their teachers and parents, not top-down from the government; greater respect for the professional experience and insights of teachers and subject communities, particularly in the fields of citizenship education, history teaching, religious education and SMSC development; greater trust and cooperation, both locally and nationally, between Muslim and non-Muslim organisations and communities; greater attention to Islamic values, wisdom and pedagogy in the field of education; renewed emphasis on the role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate as a critical friend who identifies, commends and promotes good practice; and much higher levels of due regard for the values enshrined in equalities legislation.

Throughout the deliberation that is required there needs to be recognition that a political community such as Britain is defined and constituted by the common public commitment of its citizens. Its identity, that is to say, is in the first instance political not ethnic or cultural, a crucial distinction that is obscured by the term 'national identity'. No political community can be stable and cohesive without a common sense of belonging among its citizens. This was a major emphasis in the Runnymede Trust's commission on multi-ethnic Britain, chaired by Bhikhu Parekh in 1998–2000. Citizens are required to pay taxes that may benefit others more than themselves, to delay their own demands in order that the more pressing demands of others may be met first, and to abide by certain rules of procedure and due process that may not be in their own immediate best interests. They do these things believing and trusting that others will behave similarly. It follows that belonging to a political community involves not only civic responsibilities (clumsily summarised by the government as 'fundamental British values', though there is indeed something important that needs to be summarised) but also a shared sense of belonging to an imagined community, that is, a community which has shared images.

Education should develop, it follows, not only political knowledge and participation skills but also a reservoir of shared images – icons, sights, stories, sounds, jokes, sense of history. One excellent example of a treasure-trove of shared images was provided by Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony at the 2012 Olympic Games. Not every image on that occasion was shared by everyone in Britain. That would have been neither possible nor, indeed, desirable. But the vast majority of British people saw things, episodes and people in the ceremony they could relate to, and therefore things that made them feel they belong here, and that all other people in the political community belong here too. Danny Boyle’s island story was immensely more dynamic, generous, inclusive, creative and hopeful than the government’s mean and ill-considered FBV project.
