

THE GUTS TO FIGHT BACK

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1. The baggage retrieval system at Heathrow.

Anita Craig is worried about many things: The over-use of unstructured interviews, misconceptions regarding the sex-lives of homosexuals, people who say "in my experience the importance of this cannot be underestimated" (sic), the hairstyles of black female TV continuity announcers, and so forth. We all have similar gripe lists, and labour to convince others of the importance and deep coherence of what to them may seem arbitrary and bizarre. Craig uses a well-worn strategy to achieve this. First, she invokes the master signifier of a future-directed rationality set off against all the various forms of soppy emotionality, subjective gut feelings and unthought-through prejudices that supposedly characterise "life in general in South Africa nowadays". Second, she declares herself exempt from the injunction against subjectivity, speaking in the register of authoritative but highly subjective self-disclosure. Thus we are told again and again what Craig believes, finds attractive, agrees with, is enticed by, worries about, feels unsure about, thinks, considers to be a "fine analysis", intuits, and so on; and paradoxically these intuitions all centre around a conviction that such subjective assertions do not constitute proper grounds for knowledge.

This contradiction is by no means unique to Craig's text, but is central to the dynamic constituting modernity itself. The grand narratives of modernity speak of progress through a strict adherence to standards of objective, rational enquiry, while at the same time appealing to the sovereign, subjective individual as the ultimate guarantor of what is meaningful and important (Parker, 1989). The tension between rational (objective evidence; future-directedness; standards; universal principles) and irrational (subjective feelings; the present; arbitrary preferences; particular experiences) cannot be resolved from within modernity, and Craig's text would have functioned equally effectively in re-inscribing modernist truths had she chosen to champion irrationality instead.

Seen from a modernist universe where everything has to be positioned between the two poles of rationality or irrationality, objectivity or subjectivity, reason or schmaltz, postmodernity appears not as a (potential) route out of the impasse, but as emblematic of the touchy-feely, schmaltzy side of the coin. In fairness, Craig does imply that her critique is aimed primarily against "thin" readings of postmodernity (that seek to equate it with extreme relativism, for example) although for the most part she nevertheless continues to operate as if such remarkably naive readings actually constituted an adequate understanding of postmodernity. Similarly, she tries to avoid presenting reason as purely based on universal principles, defining it in explicitly interactionist and pragmatic terms - in places almost reminiscent of the democratic, workshoppy style of knowledge production she so vehemently attacks elsewhere. Such displays of moderation and even-handedness does not, however, detract from the extent to which Craig's text is overwritten by the fundamental modernist duality - displaying exactly the kind of "not knowing about knowledge" it accuses others of.

2. Precious bodily fluids.

Understanding Craig's text as structured by a certain formulaic logic of binary opposites does not explain why it sides with the "reasonable" side of the opposition or why it should populate the "unreasonable" side with such an idiosyncratic cast of characters. Journalists reporting on Verwoerd's grandson, people crying (apparently excessively or inappropriately) at Truth Commission hearings, action researchers, people exhibiting superficially pleasant dispositions, image consultants, people who object to sexist jokes, people who base their land claims on the fact that they were the first occupiers, and so on and so forth - all are presented as contributing in one way or another to the rot.

Although Craig claims allegiance to the new democratic order and makes liberal use of the first person plural, her take on what constitutes important issues is clearly at variance with that of the majority of South Africans. The majority would be more likely, for example, to see the massive unemployment rate (rather than say the current fad for motivational speakers), as well as the structural oppression of the past, as key manifestations of an underlying lack of rationality.

What is silenced in Craig's critique is the extent to which historical processes have their own implicit reasonableness. South Africa is currently still in a period shaped by the politics of legitimacy (in which, for example, it is reasonable to base employment decisions in part on the logic of restorative racial justice), but may well be moving into an era shaped by the politics of delivery in which the electorate will shift from a position of "I vote for them because they are legitimate" to "I vote for them because they can build me a house and they will do it". There is of course no reason why Craig should be in step with such processes, but in wanting to play the role of prophet standing outside these historical contingencies she runs the risk that her text may cease to orient itself in relation to commonly recognised points of reference and be reduced instead to existing in a world of its own making.

Craig's insistent warnings against the dangers of emotionality perhaps borders on the obsessional, and in places her text does threaten to deteriorate into a form of disassociated conspiracy theory. More disturbing, however, is the tendency for the text not to lose its connection with reality, but rather to align itself with the reactionary politics of (mainly white) privilege. This is a reading which Craig repeatedly seeks to

dispel, but which is hard to avoid given the history of "race". Western conceptions of rationality have for many centuries depended on a distinction between reflective, abstract thinking supposedly characteristic of (white) civilization and the impulse-driven, brutish behaviour thought to belong to (black) savages. Thus it is difficult to appeal to the concept of reason without at the same time invoking a centuries-old discourse of racial inferiority. This is doubly so when a critique of social conditions as being unreasonable is launched in the years immediately after the installation of a predominantly black government. Craig's text is clearly not intended as racist and whether unintended racist overtones can be detected in it is obviously a matter of debate. However, it cannot but be read against a background where most privileged white South Africans constantly hear "warning bells" ringing and are convinced that decisive action is needed to prevent a slide into unreason and anarchy, while most black South Africans are filled with optimism about the future (Reality Check, 1999).

Craig should be commended for raising uncomfortable questions and for refusing to be politically correct (how many other academics would be willing to mention "women, blacks, fools, even multiple murderers" in one breath?). Like the Democratic Party's Tony Leon during the 1999 elections, she clearly has "the guts to fight back", although (as with Tony Leon) some may be a little uncomfortable about who she perceives to be the enemy and what kind of future she may be taking us back to.

REFERENCES.

Parker, I (1989) *The crisis in modern social psychology and how to end it*. London: Routledge.

Reality Check (1999) Survey of the South African Population. *The Sunday Independent*, 2 May 1999.