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Article 50 and Beyond

Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract Written in early 2017, in the aftermath of the United Kingdom's vote in June 2016 to leave the European Union and the election, in November of that year, of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, this brief article argues for an activist scholarly ethic. The author calls himself and the qualitative inquiry community to (re)commit to urgent political and moral intent.

Keywords: *qualitative inquiry, assembly, the academy, politics, activism*

On the morning of 24 June, 2016, after we had all woken to news of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, I was meeting my friend and colleague, Dagmar. We met to write. Sitting at her kitchen table, we could barely speak. Dagmar, an immigrant from Germany and a UK resident for decades, and me, a UK citizen and recent migrant to Scotland. We were living somewhere different again that morning, each of us. In a land defaced, a country we no longer recognised.

We did write that morning. We wrote that morning because we could. We wrote because we had to. Writing, working, full of grief and disbelief, was action. Futile, maybe. Insignificant, maybe. Impotent, maybe. But it was action.

The UK referendum outcome is unfolding in a wider assemblage of horror: Erdoğan's referendum in Turkey, a recent general election in the United Kingdom that returned an albeit-weakened Conservative government, and the far right gaining over a third of the vote in the 2017 French election. We perhaps had thought that morning in June last year would be as bad as it got or, at least, so caught up was I in that moment, I have felt taken unawares by what now has to be seen as a global swell of support for so-called 'populist', nationalist, nativist politics celebrating crass, oppressive, exclusionary, and patriarchal leadership, the election of President Trump riding its crest. November 8, 2016. That was another morning to wake up to. I, maybe we, could have seen all this coming, but I didn't.

Since that day in late June 2016, everything has shifted. World politics is what I wake up thinking about, a weight of grief and concern that falls on me like a leaden blanket as I rise from bed on cold mornings. I consume news. I try to make myself read bulletins that come from different political viewpoints. I can go as far as the conservative *Daily Telegraph*. I can't often bring myself to look at Breitbart or at its new UK equivalent, 'Westmonster'.

I have begun to attend marches and protests; I sign petitions. I join political organisations. I organise panels at conferences. I wonder whether I should join the planned boycott of U.S. conferences and not attend the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, but I decide I cannot support the boycott. I decide to honour my commitment to attend because the Congress is a cause, a force, for good, a site of resistance, and I must support it if I can.

I am jolted into an incipient activism I am unfamiliar with because, with Judith Butler (2017), I realise how ‘assembly is . . . a way of making a demand with the body, a corporeal claim to public space and a public demand to political powers. . . . Only a broad-based mobilisation’, she writes, ‘a form of embodied and transnational courage, we might say – will successfully defeat xenophobic nationalism and the various alibis that now threaten democracy’.

In the meantime, living continues. I try to look after myself. I see friends. I have fun. I travel south from Scotland to visit my mother in southern England, driving through a country I miss but no longer like. I kiss her forehead when I greet her, as she sits reduced and forlorn after her recent hospital stay, her right arm no longer functioning following her two falls. Sensation may return, but she will need to commit herself to the physio regime. We talk about what’s been happening for her. She tells me stories more than once. We talk about family. We don’t talk politics. She voted to leave the European Union, as did most over a certain age, while our young people like the grand-daughter sitting with us, those who will have to live in and clear up the fall-out, wanted to stay within a Europe they had grown up in and come to cherish, take for granted. I look at them both as they talk and wonder how we could have done that to my daughter’s generation. How can we live with ourselves? But we don’t discuss politics now. We say nothing of the mess the referendum decision is

creating. (I can't, by the way, bring myself to use the term *Brexit*, not without calling out its diminutive inferences, how 'Brexit' makes the issue sound easy and friendly, the name you might give to a soft toy or an Olympic mascot.)

So, in recognition of and in resistance to the process the United Kingdom is now undergoing having in March 'triggered' Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon – 'triggered', hear the violence of the act – I propose the following six articles of a new treaty, both with myself and with other qualitative researchers who wish to join me in union. I will begin with a new Article 50:

Article 50: I will never again write or teach or sit in committee meetings without noting to myself that such actions, such practices, teem with politics. I will challenge myself to ask, with Foucault, what are the conditions that make them possible?

Article 51: I will, each day, as I walk up the steep hill to my office or take out my laptop and notebook to write, or open a book or a student's writing to read, ask, *pace* Ron Pelias (2007): What work is this doing? How does this matter?

Article 52: Qualitative inquiry is itself not outside politics. We must keep arguing for its place, keep campaigning for what it can do, what it can offer, keep mindful of its capacity to speak into difficult spaces and ask awkward, demanding, exciting questions, questions that may sometimes not be welcomed or heard.

Article 53: We must hold that qualitative inquiry is collective even when individual, collaborative even when solitary, assembly even when isolate.

Article 54: Qualitative inquiry will embrace the uncertain, the difficult, and the smart. Qualitative inquiry will celebrate, not denigrate, expertise.

Article 55: Qualitative inquiry will be persistent. Qualitative inquiry will resist. We will need courage. We will need each other.

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