



# The politics of decency

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I have lots of things to say about Brexit. As a Romanian, holding a French passport, resident of the UK for the past 18 years, whose wife and children are British and whose future is nowhere if not here, I have a whole array of thoughts on a decision in which I did not have a say. As someone who has just last month begun a five-year ERC project on free speech in Europe, employing four people, I have a whole other set of thoughts on how quickly futures get swapped out for other futures. But many of the things I could say from those positions will be familiar to readers of this piece.



As an anthropologist, on the other hand, I have been attending to subtle unfamiliarities. Of the many things that were said in the week following Brexit, one comment stuck in my mind, one particular verbal splinter that I just can't brush off. This was Nigel Farage's exulting claim that the Leave vote represented a victory for "decent people". Decency is on the face of it such an outlandish qualifier in this discussion. After all, what is, by implication, "indecent" about the Remain voters? Or is the indecency which has been defeated actually on the other side of the channel, in Brussels, in Calais, in Athens, in Lampedusa, in Ankara?

I am not so interested in what Farage meant, as I am in the inherent potency of 'decency' as a political vocable. It says almost nothing and yet it says a lot. It does not particularly belong to the right or the left – and it certainly doesn't belong to Farage. Decency is a homely, everyday term of praise which can imply a profoundly barbed critique. It speaks to feelings of excess, of scale, of unacceptable strangeness, of unnatural behaviour. It speaks of obscure, obscene machinations and banal frustrations. It is very British – there are French, Spanish or German analogues, for sure, but the very work of translating them would elucidate the specificities of each.

*Decency is a powerful acid in which distinctions between different kinds of arguments, motivations and concerns are dissolved.*

Is decency a mark of political belonging, a question of age, of class, of ethnicity, of nationality? The point is not that a racist implication is hidden behind Farage's 'decent people'. To read 'decency' as a code word for something else would be short-sighted and reductive. The point is quite simply that distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate ways of categorising people, between mere political disagreement and discriminatory name-calling – those liberal ways of channeling discourse are corroded by distinctions such as those between the decent and the indecent.

Decency (and its cognates and analogues) should be of interest to anthropologists for two reasons. One is as an ethnographic prompt. The strangeness, the



discomfort of hearing 'decency' as a political vocable is a useful irritant. It reminds us of the many ways of speaking politics. Following 'decency' might provide a different entry into forms of political experience which are too often dismissed through worn terms like populism or xenophobia. As anthropologists have long been saying, we need ever-renewed ethnographic ways to attend to those who have been made 'inarticulate' by mainstream attempts to speak for and about them in languages we more easily recognize.

But the other reason why "decency" might be of interest to anthropologists is as a reminder of our own disciplinary hang-ups and evaluative reflexes. Many of us take the view that anthropology must attend to those 'inarticulated' voices – post-Brexit more than ever. The small-scale, the unheard, the everyday – anthropologists have a stake and a duty there. Consequently, it becomes easy to imagine anthropology as a kind of expertise bent only on challenging 'the rule of experts', as a discipline inherently bent on the destructive critique of liberal elites and their standard political vocabularies. And that, in turn, gives me pause. The thing is, I hear the echo of an appeal to 'decent people' somewhere in there. That echo makes me uncomfortable.

When Farage claims to be speaking about and for "the real people, the ordinary people", he seems to be stealing anthropologists' best line. It is only when he adds "the decent people" that the difference becomes, to my mind at least, obvious.

*Anthropology can attend to alternative political languages and to uncomfortable claims and concerns. It can challenge safe assumptions and taken-for-granted pieties. It can do all this, however, without claiming to speak for 'the decent people'.*

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