

Suzanne Whitten, Queen's University, Belfast, "Political Vulgarly and the Limits of 'Uncivil' Contestation"

While largely unexamined in the political theory literature, 'political vulgarity' - understood here as a form of political communication deliberately designed to provoke shock, horror, and/or disgust in the target audience- has been strategically employed as a tool of contestation for centuries (Bakhtin 1895; Thorogood 1991). For defenders of such forms of expression, one key benefit of such actions stems from their capacity to communicate dissent in rhetorically effective ways. Quite simply, by directly flouting common (local) norms of decency within a given context, it is believed that vulgar expression will trigger reactive attitudes in an audience, which in turn raises the salience of the issue the protesters hope to bring to the audience's attention, thereby (it is hoped) providing an opportunity to explain a previously ignored position more fully. In the context of today's fast-moving online culture, the hope for many defenders of vulgarity is that such practices will capture the attention of mainstream and independent media (including individual posters on social media), thereby offering opportunities to influence public debate. In that sense, vulgarity serves a strategic function that can help place previously ignored issues on the political agenda. A second, related purpose of vulgarity connects to its role in subverting norms that (according to protestors) serve to uphold wrongful hierarchies themselves (Scott 1987). Here, the direct challenge of prevailing norms of 'politeness' or decorum can be seen as an example of subversion, aimed at disrupting what are (according to protestors) sets of norms designed not to guide respectful relations between shared members of a polity, but to instead reinforce unjust social hierarchies.

In this paper, I take seriously the claims made by such activists that so-called 'political vulgarity' is an important and ethically acceptable method of mainstreaming marginalized social issues. However, I want to raise a challenge against vulgarity as a method of political persuasion, even where it serves an important salience-raising purpose. I justify this claim on the basis that, while what are considered 'vulgar' methods of protest do often draw significant attention, it is uncertain that such attention effectively translates as the kind of ethical claim that protestors aim to make upon the wider community. I instead defend a qualified version of political vulgarity. On this account, in order for methods of contestation to effectively communicate and impress claims towards the wider public, they need to be guided by a set of shared social and moral norms and habits that allow the claims made by protestors to be given uptake as a form of moral address. Such a virtuous form of political vulgarity requires that protestors take seriously the range of affective and cognitive responses that a vulgar form of protest might evoke in their audience, employing those responses to strategically and effectively communicate their claims upon them. While employing virtuous vulgarity requires that protestors sacrifice some of the subversive

potential of their actions, I argue that such a sacrifice must be made if protestors hope to fulfil their communicative duties.