CALLING OUT

[Abstract: 'Calling out', in the sense of denouncing or accusing, has recently become a term of choice in progressive public discourse. Its connotations of freedom, certainty and practical effectiveness make it not only a popular but a populist expression; as such it carries both the energies and the deformities of current populist politics.]

Calling out objectionable cultural phenomena is new. In the mainstream press for the year 2000, the phrasal verb 'to call out' appears quite frequently, but not in the sense it has since acquired. Pupils' names are called out, or the fire brigade, but not abuses or offending celebrities. By 2010 the new, political sense is measurably arriving: in the *New York Times*, for instance, out of 22 uses of the verb in the last four months of the year, 4 have the new meaning. But in the most recent four months (that is, to the end of September 2020), the *Times* yields about 100 occurrences, of which over half carry the new sense. Repeating the exercise with the London *Guardian* produces the same pattern: the number of relevant uses over four months increases from 1 out of 17 in 2010 to 48 out of 84 today.

Two things have happened at once. One is simply that the expression has become popular. In contexts where until recently people would have said 'accuse' or 'expose' or 'criticise', they now say 'call out'. And the other is that although the verb means several different things, it is its political sense – 'to draw hostile public attention to' – that has become its *salient* meaning, the one it communicates the most readily and with the least need for contextual clues. This is indicated for example by articles in which Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, and Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor of Myanmar, are each criticised for not 'calling out' the military in their respective countries (*NYT,* 15/09/10 and 24/10/17). At any time before the early 2000s, I think, a Head of State who 'called out the military' would be understood to have ordered tanks on to the streets. In both these contexts, on the contrary, 'calling out the military' means criticising the Army's human rights violations. Surprisingly, no sub-editor seems to have spotted a potential ambiguity. The new sense is firmly in the semantic driving seat.

To that extent it displaces the senses in which the verb was being used before, and there is an interesting assortment of these. One is the sense I just touched on in

relation to the military: calling out a service of some kind, such as policing or pest control, means arranging for it to be delivered at a specified location. Another common variety is as it were literal: 'to call out' means to shout, or to project one's voice. And a third, more restricted but I think also influential, is the use of the phrase in sport: a shot in tennis, or a member of the batting side in baseball, may be 'called out', and the term has a precise meaning within the rules of the game. All these uses are distinct, and of course they go on functioning within their defining contexts more or less undisturbed. But their continued presence in the environment of the new locution affects both its referential meaning and its connotative range – in fact I would argue that between them they provide the materials for understanding the force that this turn of phrase has rather suddenly acquired.

From the first of the three, the sense of a service call-out, comes the implication that to call something out is an action. *Protesting*, say, about an injustice, is in itself nothing but words. I express my opposition and it's done. But I have not 'called out' a plumber unless he actually arrives: the meaning of the verb includes real-world action. So by association, *calling out* injustice sounds more effectual than merely complaining about it. The expression boosts my morale by helping me feel that I am doing something, even if in practice my activity is purely verbal; this is presumably one reason for choosing to use it.

Secondly, the phrase brings from its pre-political life the suggestion of forceful speech. To call out the winning numbers, to call out to the next-door neighbours – that kind of calling out means, at the very least, raising one's voice, making a special effort to be audible. This tends to make political 'calling out' a specific antonym of remaining silent, so that when women *call out* sexual predators, or people of colour *call out* racist policing, it is in conscious negation of a history of not being heard. This was vividly expressed in an email to the *New York Times* printed in December 2017 in the spreading wake of the MeToo hashtag, whose legendary launch had occurred on 15th October. Pat, from Ann Arbor, Michigan, wrote:

Maybe as a result of all this women will feel empowered to call out (loudly) harassment when it happens. We should probably have training classes ...

where we could practice yelling "Get your hand off my butt, mister" or whatever is called for at the time.[1]

Deborah Cameron once pointed out that expressions disseminated through the media are subject to 'discursive drift' because the speakers who adopt them lack the normal conversational means of confirming whether they are using their new term correctly. They are partly guessing how to use it, and therefore sometimes end up unconsciously modifying it.[2] I think that is what happens here: the received phrase hesitates between its media-borne transitive mode ('to call out harassment') and its previous, intransitive existence (just 'to call out'). The slight equivocation then reveals the connection between the two senses: the idea of *calling out* a wrong that has been done implies not only the exposure of the perpetrator, but also, in the same breath, the released self-expression of the former victim. In the language of an earlier phase of identity politics, to 'call it out' means to *say it loud*.

Thirdly, the phrase comes with an echo of its life in sport. This bears on its political use in two different ways. The more obvious of these is a general lightening of the tone. Calling someone out, compared with conceivable alternatives such as 'accusing' or 'denouncing' them, sounds like an informal thing to do, partly because the phrasal verb is in any case more colloquial than the Latinate compound, but also because it evokes the unpretentious atmosphere of a game; it thus implies a spontaneous human judgment rather than a burdensome official one. But then, on the other hand, the same association has the effect of making the judgment itself seem absolutely unquestionable. Within the game, after all, the calling is done by an umpire, whose decision is by convention final. Once they have called it out it *is* out; their ruling has the status of a fact, not an opinion. It is not surprising if speakers engaged in public controversy enjoy a phrase which seems to afford them such uncomplicated authority. It faintly conjures up a fantasy world in which (say) sexism is no less evidently invalid than an overhit ball; a sort of ideological Hawkeye demonstrates beyond all possibility of dispute that it is on the wrong side of the line.

If we set these three perspectives up together, the appeal of the new expression is obvious. It gives the enunciation of a judgment the air of a practical action; it combines that with an emancipatory gesture of self-assertion; and it represents the

judgment itself as incontestable. It is thus an empowering, even celebratory locution, signifying the strength and rightness of the caller-out as centrally as the culpability of the object. It also confers freedom from the restrictions of legal process: *calling out* is appropriate to a lively public meeting rather than a court of law. Consequently it is not inhibited by procedural distinctions between accusation, conviction, and punishment, but is, in its easy, demotic way, a bit of all of them.

This characterisation can be summed up in one word: in its privileging of action over reflection, felt rightness over due process, the shared beliefs of a community over the sceptical discriminations of an elite, 'call out' is a *populist* locution, and it is as a function of the contemporary rise of populist politics that its sudden adoption makes sense. Watching its behaviour therefore provides a useful reminder that the deformations of populism – its sentiment, its authoritarianism, its excitable over-simplifications – are not, as it sometimes seems, confined to the right. Rather, they spread virally throughout the political language without respecting partisan distinctions: if we are not careful, we all end up talking like that. It follows that the project of *criticism* needs to be wary of the practice of *calling out*, even, or especially, when its objects undeniably deserve it.

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[1] 'The #MeToo Moment: Dream Crushers', *NYT*, 5 December, 2017

[2] Deborah Cameron, 'Words, Words, Words: the Power of Language', in *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, ed. Sarah Dunant, Virago, 1994, p. 20.