



PLENARY

ZOE WILLIAMS

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THEATRE B, UNIVERSITY PLACE

THE URGENCY OF HUMOUR: HOW TO RECOVER COLLECTIVE SPIRIT IN THE AGE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The individualisation of both success and failure has been a crucial frame in the creation of the current social argument: one that minimises the responsibility we have for one another, emphasises the escape from, rather than the eradication of, poverty, and thereby obviates broader creative ambitions for society, negating both the value and feasibility of collective action.

I'm going to look specifically at the role of the media, and to a lesser extent, those manipulating the media, have played in this.

When I started in journalism, there was certainly no shortage of problematic presentation, in the tabloids and mid-market newspapers - in the late Nineties, the two major fixations were migrants bringing in disease (specifically, HIV and TB from Sub-Saharan Africa); and women not procreating fast enough, the liberation from the maternal imperative perceived, probably rightly, as a significant emboldening trend. These stories were ongoing, and had an impact on political messaging - the Conservative campaign in 2005, the first run by Lynton Crosby, was fixed on the HIV/TB message, which had been dominating headlines for at least seven years by that point.

While both stories were underpinned by a right-wing philosophy - in the first place, emphasising the purity of the national bloodstream, downplaying the duty of sanctuary; in the second place, exerting gender essentialism to batten back equality - they weren't linked or coherent, there was no insistent drum beat, the stories didn't seem to feed naturally back to a single worldview. It was, to use the journalistic jargon of the time, just Daily Mail bullshit.

Since the recession, becoming more pronounced from the start of the Coalition government, and certainly partly driven by the rhetoric deployed in that campaign, there has been a much more concerted message, centred around the individual: broadly, a citizen is measured by his or her economic productivity. Hard working families are good; all benefits claimants are tainted.

By 2016, the impact on citizens had become quite pronounced, albeit my experiences of this were quite anecdotal: I noticed that quite affluent people were using tropes around personal responsibility - migrants being lazy, having too many kids, being here for the benefits - that ten years ago you'd only have heard in really deprived areas, and even then, in less explicit terms.

Thinking about how to combat this, at the level of the media, all I know so far is what doesn't work. So, to say, this is factually wrong, to point out that many people are both hardworking and on benefits, doesn't cut through. My hunch is that we're starting too far down the pipeline: trying to challenge a narrative that is already most of the way through, and has a momentum which facts can't arrest, indeed, the interjection of reality is an irritant, a distraction from a more exciting story. What we really need is a competing frame. I'm not the first person to think this! In the creation of competing narratives, though, there's too much positivity and pity. If you look at I, Daniel Blake as the flagship competing narrative, the people in it are all too good, too nice to each other, and the world is too hard on them. It may be true but it's saccharine. An alternative frame has to have a biting element, which I think can only come from humour. That's the achilles heel of

individualisation: it can withstand an infinite amount of factual critique, but it relies on a puffed up pomposity that is very vulnerable to humour. I'll explore what this would look like in a media context.

Zoe Williams was born in 1973 in London. She attended Godolphin and Latymer school in Hammersmith and went on to read modern history at Lincoln college, Oxford. She currently lives in Camberwell with her partner and their son and daughter.



Williams is a columnist for the *Guardian*, *Spectator* and *New Statesman*. She is most well known for her political and cultural commentary, but her journalism extends into popular culture, parenting, and transport. with publications in *Now!* magazine, *London Cyclist*, and the *Evening Standard*. She has also worked as a restaurant reviewer for the *Sunday Telegraph*.

Prior to meeting her current partner Williams wrote 'Diary of a single woman' as a regular column for the *Guardian*. Since having children Williams has published her first book - 'What not to expect when you're expecting', which emerged out of her 'Anti-natal' column. Originally published in 2010 under the title 'bringing it on baby', the republication of the book in 2012 under the new title brought it critical acclaim.

In addition to her prolific journalistic contributions, Williams also makes regular television and radio appearances. Her participation in the BBC 4 documentary 'Teenage kicks: the search for sophistication' was praised by Clive James as "*A short piece to camera that was almost an Aria*". Williams also presented the radio documentary 'Inside Academy school revolution', and BBC Radio 4's 'What the papers' say'.

A supporter of the British Humanist Association, Williams describes her political views as left wing, and also tackles feminist issues in much of her writing. When asked about her chosen profession, Williams described writing as an accident rather than a choice - "*Everyone grows up writing. Writers are just people that don't stop*".

Williams' career continues to grow, and in 2012 she was long-listed for the Orwell prize. In 2010 she was named columnist of the year at the Work World media awards.

Chair: Janice McLaughlin, BSA Membership Services Director (University of Newcastle)