

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Banksy, Hogarth and the Art of Political Representation

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**Abstract:** Rarely in the postwar period has the western system of representative democracy seemed more criticised and less respected. From historically low turnouts to the disparagement of the motives of politicians as individuals and as a class, voters seem increasingly disillusioned and disengaged. Questions of representation are centrally at stake in both art and politics and the premise of this essay is that recent art can help us understand the current democratic predicament. The particular work which provokes my reflections is *Devolved Parliament*, Banksy's thirteen foot long oil painting of the House of Commons, which recently sold for a record breaking sum. Its sale price no doubt says much about the state of the art market in the UK and elsewhere, but what, if anything, does the painting have to say about contemporary politics?

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*Devolved Parliament* was executed over a decade ago and first exhibited in the 'Banksy versus Bristol Museum' exhibition, which took place at the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery in 2009. Very different to the graffiti pieces for which he is best known, the canvas is a conventional realist view of the House of Commons, almost parodically so. Only the replacement of humans with monkeys breaks with this, a minimal shift that is hard to see as a move into a magical realism. Originally entitled *Question Time*, the prime minister is depicted as a primate standing at the despatch box. In front of him on the opposition benches backbencher simians can be seen to be shouting and calling. It should be noted that the visitors in the galleries are depicted similarly, making it difficult to see the painting as a caricature of politicians

as in some derogatory sense as ‘apes’. Perhaps one could suggest that in a wider sense Banksy is criticising a perceived ‘elite’ world of politics if it were not for the fact that monkeys and particularly chimpanzees are a recurrent, if somewhat difficult to place, figure in his work. The painting was returned to the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery to mark ‘Brexit day’, 29th March 2019, the day Britain was initially supposed to leave the EU. At this time its title was changed to *Devolved Parliament*. The painting was significantly altered at the same time, the lamps illuminating the chamber being painted out and the canvas consequently being reworked in less harsh and more sombre tones. The only other notable change is that the upturned banana of an ape in the foreground now faces downwards suggesting perhaps a certain flaccidity and impotence brought on by Brexit.<sup>1</sup> But it is also possible to see this as an artistic reflection on the success of the canvas itself.



**Figure 1:** Banksy, *Devolved Parliament*

*Question Time*, before the reworking, bears some striking similarities with the well known kitsch series of paintings of animals playing poker or pool created by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge between 1902 and his death in 1934.<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times* describes the typical scene these portray: ‘large dogs ... are typically arrayed in a comfortable den around a card table with a green felt top. A shaded lamp centred above them casts the scene’s only light’.<sup>3</sup> Coolidge’s original images gave rise to a rash of imitations amounting to a veritable kitsch genre into which the first version of Banksy’s painting teeters on the edge of slipping into. There are particular similarities between *Question Time* and Coolidge’s *Hustler*, one image in the series that depicts

dogs playing pool. In both paintings where one would expect humans one finds anthropogenic animals, dogs in Coolidge and apes in Banksy. In addition, in both, green is the dominant colour whether with the felt table top and glass lamps in one image or the overwhelming green of the Commons benches in the other. The bright lamps and the way their highly directional light gives the scene a glossy feel is also common to *Question Time* and *Hustler*.<sup>4</sup> There are of course very significant differences, Banksy gives us a monumental canvas of an iconic public space whereas Coolidge give us the leisure activities of a small group in anonymous domestic interiors. However, one can't help feeling that the reworking of Banksy's canvas is a not very successful attempt to distance it from such corny parallels.

The tone of *Question Time*, of course, differs markedly from Coolidge's sickly affectionate images. Banksy seems to want to distance us from the apes and their parliament rather than fondly regard them. The original title was a reference to the occasion when the Prime Minister or other members of the executive are called before the House of Commons to reply to questions from parliamentarians. In the case of the PM in particular this event is traditionally something of a setpiece occasion and often rather boisterous. In recent times the behaviour manifested has been the subject of criticism. Joni Lovenduski, a professor of politics at Birkbeck who specialises in gender, has claimed 'the ritual sustains the traditional masculine culture by continually repeating performances of adversarial confrontation'.<sup>5</sup> Such criticisms have become mainstream enough to be taken up by politicians themselves. Shortly after Banksy's work went on show the then newly elected Prime Minister David Cameron complained question time was 'too adversarial' and the then new Speaker, John Bercow, that it was 'far too noisy'.<sup>6</sup> We might see Banksy's painting making such a critique but for the fact that his own known politics are much more radical than those of would be reformers of parliamentary etiquette.

Banksy's replacement of human parliamentarians with chimpanzees might be taken in a different way to make a radical political statement. Could it be that he is making reference to the suggestion occasionally made lately, that non-human life perhaps together with future life, needs formal representation in our political system? In recent years such a claim has been mostly notably made by Donaldson and Kymlicka.<sup>7</sup> This is tempting yet the depiction is not one which seems to seek to dignify the apes but rather the simian comparison seems to be a denigration of the human members of the House of Commons. Looking to Banksy's own statements for insight into how any potential satire might work, we might note he told journalists at the time of what we might call the painting's relaunch in March 2019: 'you paint one hundred chimpanzees and they still call you a guerrilla artist'.<sup>8</sup> Witty, but it risks making *Devolved Parliament* into a one dimensional pun rather than an artwork. I would suggest that perhaps the key to understanding the painting is another comment Banksy posted to his Instagram feed at the time of the

reshowing. What he said then was: ‘Laugh now, but one day no-one will be in charge’. This is a reference to one of his most iconic images *Laugh Now* (2002), a six-meter-long stencilled graffiti which pictures a row of chimpanzees with the caption: ‘Laugh now, but one day we’ll be in charge’. In that piece the viewer seemed to be invited to take the viewpoint of the monkeys and the work, more typical of the agit prop for which Banksy is famous, has an obvious radical charge that is absent in *Devolved Parliament*.

The figure of the simian in his oeuvre is quite widespread but hard to read. A work from his breakthrough exhibition ‘Turf War’ in 2003 depicted Queen Elizabeth II as a chimpanzee (unsurprisingly entitled ‘Monkey Queen’). For the most part, however, as with the mischievous chimp drinking from a petrol can in the modified oil painting shown in the same exhibition, when Banksy depicts monkeys it is as anarchic, impish, rebellious figures the viewer might be expected to identify with and which the artist affirms.<sup>9</sup> *Laugh Now* is perhaps the paradigm of this with Banksy putting an openly anarchist political message into the mouths of the apes. *Question Time/Devolved Parliament* is its inverse, a depiction of everything Banksy would ostensibly seek to be politically overthrown. And that is perhaps why the work fails, or largely does so for as we will see it can perhaps be read against the grain. An initial reaction is to wonder at the sudden move from stencilling to outsized oil paintings. It is hard to see it as other than the result of naked commercial motives - the temptation to give the art market a certain type of more tangible and traditional art commodity that it will greedily devour. Given the price the painting went for, its fate is to be an investment chip in the financial portfolio (a.k.a. art collection) of a member of the super rich. This is an ironic turn that Banksy is well aware of: the very same month as the auction he exhibited work in a locked-up shop in London, a commentary on artworks being the property of the rich. Quite who is having the last laugh in this situation is far from clear.<sup>10</sup>

I would suggest that the best way to understand Banksy’s oeuvre is as an artistic elevation of subvertising, developing memorable memes that promote counter cultural ideas or politics. One December a few years back, for example, he drew attention to homelessness by painting the dreamlike figures of two reindeer taking off onto the wall beside the all too static bench on which a homeless man was sleeping in Birmingham.<sup>11</sup> While the public habitually walk past the rough sleeper with little more regard than for the street furniture, Banksy’s artwork highlights their presence and makes them again a part of the Christmas festivities that they are physically and economically excluded from. Similarly, in 2018 he created a piece ‘Vote to Love’.<sup>12</sup> This followed on the Brexit referendum, and took a ‘Vote to Leave’ placard and obscured the ‘ea’ of leave with a balloon (another recurrent image in Banksy work), patched and in a heart shape. This made the slogan read ‘Vote to Love’. This comment on the tone of the campaign was originally submitted under a false name to the Royal Academy summer show which rejected it. Re-





Figure 2: Banksy, *Laugh Now*

submitted in Banksy's own name, it was later displayed (a development which reflects very badly on the integrity of the London art scene). I would suggest that this work, where we might see Banksy at his best, is both political representation and artistic representation. Which is to say that 'Vote to Love' is both a political intervention into the aftermath of the referendum on British membership of the European Union but also an artistic work, an image which is far from simply being a functional political communication. Similarly, his Birmingham stencil makes a political statement about homelessness at the same time as leaving a small trace of the utopian in the everyday. There is none of this in *Question Time/Devolved Parliament*. Instead of the surprise of a transformation in a small corner of the city, we have an overblown reversion to a gallery wall filler. Perhaps its greatest weakness is the absence of any of glimmer of the hope that characterises the best of Banksy's work.

In the sale catalogue, Sotheby's suggested Banksy's *Devolved Parliament* could be compared with Hogarth's *The Humours of an Election* (1755). The latter was described by them as an attempt 'to expose the underlying controversy, corruption and chaos that lay at the heart of British politics before the Great Reform Act of 1832'. I would suggest that this is a mistaken parallel and one which would only be correct if Banksy's intentions were those of a would be reformer of parliament, which it seems he is not. It is further claimed that the first painting of the series, *An Election Entertainment*, is 'a scene not dissimilar to Banksy's *Devolved Parliament*' where 'characters at

a tavern dinner organised by the Whig candidates who, bawdy and boozed, are engaged in a litany of lawless behaviour'. Yet what is depicted there, as Sotheby's say 'from bribery to gluttony, violence to total inebriation' is rather different to what we are given by Banksy. *The Humours of an Election* series was the first of two forays into political satire on Hogarth's part. He had 'commenced painter of small Conversation pieces from twelve to fifteen inches high', providing the contemporary art market with what was then most in demand.<sup>13</sup> But these conventional works did not satisfy him and he determined 'to compose pictures on canvas similar to representations on the stage'. *The Humours* came more than twenty years after his most famous works, *A Harlot's Progress* (1731), *A Rake's Progress* (1733), and *Marriage-a-la-Mode*. Its subject was the General Election of 1754 and in particular the notorious County Election held at Oxford. Normally in the unreformed politics of the eighteenth century, parties sought to avoid county elections, which were expensive affairs which involved courting the votes of an expensive forty shilling franchise. This meant that actual elections were rare, informal agreements usually saw to it that contests never took place and, for example, only three counties actually voted in the General Election of 1761.

In 1752 this system fell apart when the Duke of Marlborough, a devoted Whig or champion of the 'New Interest' launched an attack on Oxford, the traditional stronghold, of Toryism. Hogarth's series of paintings are not a reportage of the subsequent campaign. Notably, the last of the series, *Chairing the Member*, depicts an event that never took place because a scrutiny of the ballot was immediately demanded. Hogarth's canvases are a depiction of eighteenth century political life which contain both a strong moral judgement at the same time as somewhat contradictory casting of something of a fond eye on his fellow Britons. The images he gives us of strong party affiliations and the political corruption of vote buying are quite vivid. Perhaps the strongest single message concerns the dangerous effects of the popular feeling to which there are a number of references, most notably to the anti-semitic sentiment that arose surrounding a measure which would have allowed for the naturalisation of foreign Jews. Hogarth's painting as such is artistic representation that is also political representation, not just a reflection on how politics operated in mid-eighteenth century England but a call for its reform.<sup>14</sup> Similar to the way in which his almost contemporary prints, *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane*, constituted part of a wider attempt to impose legislation on the sale of spirits, so his political prints held up an unflattering mirror to the conduct of parliamentary elections and highlighted the need for change.

In contrast, *Question Time/Devolved Parliament* is not an observation of how political representation works, or even does not work, in contemporary Britain. It appears to be a one dimensional condemnation of parliament which fails to grant to it any positive role whatsoever. As a political statement this is hardly unexpected given Banksy's oeuvre - notably the particular work which he himself highlights for the benefit of interpreters - gives con-

vincing evidence of strong sympathies with anarchist positions. One artistic reason why this canvas does not work is that such a message is profoundly incongruous with his chosen medium in this case, an oversized realist canvas. But the problem with the work goes beyond this and lies in inherent contradictions concerning representation of anarchist inspired politics. In principle anarchists seek to supplant existing democratic institutions by decision making on an ultra local level. As Banksy reminds us the chimp tells us: ‘one day we’ll be in charge’. A repeated claim associated with such ideas is that there is no representation in anarchist politics. I would argue that this is incorrect. All political actions, even ones that claim to stand beyond the political system, have effects within it, occasionally powerful ones. For example, it is said that the Zapatistas are anti-representative on the basis that they don’t seek to participate in the electoral process. But it can be argued that, in novel ways and standing at a distance from the conventional political process, they do seek to bring to representation the lives of people who were previously politically invisible.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that Marcos goes beyond any attempt at simply mirroring the social and that he is a political artist, fashioning a new political reality. And this is what any good political representation should do. As political theorist Frank Ankersmit has argued, against established views which see political representation as simply imitative, it is necessarily creative in similar ways to art.<sup>16</sup>

Pierre Rosanvallon, a Collège de France political scientist, contends that in advanced democracies a variety of institutions and practices acts as a ‘counter democracy’ which supplements the formal process of political representation.<sup>17</sup> Anarchists might like to think of their political activities as somehow beyond representation but such theories show how they can be seen to participate in representation. A brief survey readily illustrates the political effectiveness of their interventions. In the UK context, we might think of the considerable impact that EarthFirst!, an environmental collective organised on anarchist principles, has had on road building and transport policies since the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Reclaim the Streets, whose actions deliberately sought to confound the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic, have drawn attention in highly effective ways to issues such as car culture and the privatisation of public space.<sup>19</sup> The successes of these two groups have arguably been formative for the more recent development of Extinction Rebellion, an activist group with a much more extensive base, whose protests have helped move awareness of climate change to the forefront of public consciousness. It might be that society would be better organised away from the state but, here and now, while it continues to exist anarchists have potently engaged in political representation, helping set the agenda on a number of key social issues.

Banksy’s artistic representation can thus be presented as engaging in what amounts to political representation. Its success is linked to its taking place in the most public possible fashion beyond any artistic institutions, on walls

anyone can see from public streets which are then further massively media-tised. It could, for example, be argued that he represents the homeless by making them newly visible in the urban landscape and by humanising them again through drawing them into a festive season from which they have been excluded. He might not wish to engage with the political system but it cannot be denied his work has a certain efficacy within much wider processes. This is different, say, to that of an NGO such as Crisis when it launched its campaign, ‘No One Turned Away’, which sought to change a regime where only families effectively had a right to housing after becoming homeless. They also sought to impose duties on local authorities to take action to prevent people losing their homes in the first place. Banksy’s representation of roughsleepers is also different to the passing of a piece of legislation by the Houses of Parliament, the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017), in response to that campaign but it is undoubtedly does play a role, no matter how inchoate or incalculable, in changing the practical realities around how homelessness is perceived.<sup>20</sup> No doubt the precise provisions or the implementation of this Act can be subject to criticism but the Banksy who is concerned about the plight of the homeless cannot coherently make a blanket condemnation of the House of Commons. Coming back to *Question Time/Devolved Parliament* after looking a little more closely at what goes on in political representation we might then read his chimpanzees against the grain. The monkey is the ambiguous symbol of political activity in Banksy and it is perhaps not so surprising after all to see them in the Commons.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Taylor Dafoe 2019. See URLs.

<sup>2</sup>Carla Davidson 1973, 174. See also Richard F. Snow 2003, 203.

<sup>3</sup>James McManus 2005.

<sup>4</sup>A further similarity is the high price fetched by Coolidge paintings in recent years despite their clearly belonging to commercial rather than fine art. As long ago as 2005 one sold for \$590,400.

<sup>5</sup>A poll she commissioned showed that female voters are less favourably inclined towards PMQs than men. Joni Lovenduski, ‘Prime Minister’s Questions as Masculinity’ Political Studies Association Insight Plus.

<sup>6</sup>Hélène Mulholland 2010.

<sup>7</sup>Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 101-155.

<sup>8</sup>Caroline Goldstein 2019.

<sup>9</sup>The figure of the chimpanzee in Banksy’s art perhaps has one of its origins in British popular culture. In a series of television commercials in the 1980s produced by Tetley, a major manufacturer of teabags, the consumers of their product are portrayed as affable apes. They inhabit homely surroundings and speak with broad regional accents. These anthropomorphic advertisements share the same kitschy warmth as Coolidge’s paintings. It may be that the Tetley chimpanzees are a congenial image of ‘the people’ which, despite their origins in the raw capitalism of television advertising, Banksy feels able to appropriate and develop.

<sup>10</sup>I worked for my doctoral thesis at the University of the West of England which



is located in Bristol, the city with which Banksy is most closely associated. One day I saw a rather striking image – which I now know to be a print of ‘Love is in the Air’ - in the window of the local radical book cooperative. It was priced at £250 which was a sizable sum for a student. I thought about it a few days and resolved to buy it, but, of course, when I went back to the shop it was sold. It is now astounding to read that prints from the run of 500 are currently going for prices which are equivalent to a flat in Bristol (if unsigned) and a house (if signed). I had always presumed Banksy was selling direct through the bookshop but read online recently that the original prints were £40 (unsigned) and £80 (signed). If it is gutting for me to think of my missed purchase, how much more so for the original reseller who once owned one of these prints but sold it on for a mere couple of hundred quid profit?

<sup>11</sup>‘Homeless man’, see URLs.

<sup>12</sup>See URLs.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Quennell 1953.

<sup>14</sup>Jon Lawrence 2009, 7, 17-8.

<sup>15</sup>For such a critique see the reading of Simon Tormey’s *The End of Representative Politics* in Mihail Evans 2020, 118-143.

<sup>16</sup>Space prevents elaboration of this important suggestion in more detail. Ankersmit’s claim is that ‘political reality is not first given to us and subsequently represented; political reality comes into being after and due to representation’ Frank Ankersmit 1996, 47. See also Ankersmit 2002. The appropriation of his work for a more explicitly radical politics in Lawrence Hamilton 2014b and 2014a is suggestive for discussions of anarchist politics.

<sup>17</sup>Pierre Rosanvallon 2008.

<sup>18</sup>Derek Wall 1999.

<sup>19</sup>Julia Ramírez Blanco 2013.

<sup>20</sup>See URLs.

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