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Grief, Public Space and ‘People’s Power’

Emotional democracy

Few people will forget the moment at which they heard the terrible news about Diana’s sudden and violent death and the sense of disbelief that went along with it. It becomes an ‘event’ that helps to shape cultural memory in ways that is both personal and shared within the larger community. It becomes one of those moments, like Kennedy’s death for an earlier generation or 9/11, where you can pinpoint where you were when you first heard the news. It is through such vital events that cultural memories are produced and then circulated through the mass media that help to provide a context and larger narrative though which people hope to ‘make sense’ of what you have lived through.

There was an abiding sense for many, that seems to characterise such pivotal events, that ‘this cannot be real’, that it had to be a ‘bad dream’ that they will wake up from sooner or later. But as Sunday morning, 31 August 1997 drew on many of us sat quietly and sadly almost mesmerised by the television screen. It did not seem to matter that we had heard so much of the news before, or seen the images of the tangled Mercedes that had crashed in the Paris underpass so many times before. It still did not feel real and there was some dim hope that by listening to the same stories over again and seeing the same images it might all ‘sink in’.

There was also anger as people realised the extent to which she had been ‘hounded’ by the press. As her brother was to remind us at the funeral, Diana named after the god of hunting, had become the most hunted person on the planet. There was also an immediate and palpable sense of guilt as people felt a responsibility for their insatiable appetite for images of her. As the day moved towards the evening,
more people were talking on the TV about their sense of responsibility and issuing appeals for people not to purchase the tabloid papers that would surely be issuing special editions. People had felt bad that she had not even been able to find peace with her new relationship, Dodi Fayed, who seemed to be offering her the love and support she yearned for, but never seemed to find in her life. It seemed as if they had been chased by paparazzi all day, eager to get pictures of the couple together ‘at whatever price’. In the end it seemed as if they had also caused her death.

Along with the guilt there was also a terrible sense of shame that seemed to grip the country as people recognised their own sense of complicity, that ‘we’ had all in some way aided this terrible situation by our own hunger for images of Diana. These are not easy feelings to accept in oneself, and it might have encouraged people to take to the streets in order to assuage these difficult feelings. The flowers that began to gather at the gates of the royal palaces could also be seen as partly gift offerings, ways of saying sorry for having been involved in some way in these terrible events.

It brought back to people their individual responsibility and sense that individuals do make a difference, which was part of the learning that was also taking place in the wake of her death. It was something that a new ecological awareness and planetary consciousness was also teaching, as a younger generation in particular, was embodying a new vision of politics, a new sense of the consequences of individual actions. This promised to create a different relationship between individual and community, removed from the polarity between market individualism and collectivism that has dominated post war British politics. The events around Diana’s funeral made visible certain cultural and political trends that might have seemed to find a temporary identification with New Labour but were soon to show themselves in a more general disillusionment with party politics and political institutions.

In the early hours as the news of Diana’s death broke many people stayed in stunned by what was going on outside and unbelieving. It seemed safe inside. But there were soon reports that the young princes, William and Harry, who everyone was feeling for in their tragic moment of grief, were going on ‘as usual’ with Charles and his parents to the local Church. As the watched the cars leave Balmoral there was a sense of disbelief, as if the way to deal with tragedy was to insist that ‘life goes on as normal’. This was to expose the princes to the public and to the media and there seemed something almost shocking about it, as if they were not to be given the time to ‘take in’ what had happened, whilst