sharing in the same historical conditions; as different genera-
tions within a single family’s line of descent.

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A sense of national solidarity has emerged among
Egyptians, indeed among citizens of the Arab world, out
of their common struggle against oppression; against the
’sates of exception’ decreed by their rulers that had become
part of their daily lives; against the humiliation of poverty.
From Morocco to Jordan to Yemen to Bahrain, Arabs of dif-
ferent backgrounds and political persuasions have risen up
against absolutism, against dynastic rule both monarchical
and republican, and against their various rulers: the old,
the young, and the mad.

‘They were listening!’ a fellow anthropologist exclaimed
as we watched the events of January 2011 unfold. She was
referring to the late Edward Said’s call to the Arab people
to renounce their passivity and take action to transform their
social and political worlds (Hafez 2011; cf. Said 2003). But
have scholars been listening well enough to them? More spe-
cifically regarding our own discipline, did the popular move-
ments now sweeping the region take anthropologists of the
Middle East and North Africa by surprise?

As an Egyptian anthropologist whose research has focused
on elites, I am well aware of the challenges and ethical
dilemmas facing anthropologists who work under dictator-
ships. And I confess to having tried – by studying deposed
royals – to orient my own research towards politically more
’safe’ topics, and to having on occasion deferred publication
for fear of the consequences my work could have for my
informants, my family, or myself. But, while I do not exempt
myself from criticism, I am concerned about the discipline
and the approach of its practitioners. It seems to me that, for
the most part, the privileged zones of theoretical enquiry in
this region are still the ones Lila Abu-Lughod (1989) deline-
ated over two decades ago: ‘tribe’, ‘women’ and ‘Islam’.

What is going to happen next is not clear. What is certain
is that change has come to Egypt and to the Arab world.
Protesters have called into question the ‘stability’ of the
political systems, sustained by Arab regimes, Western
leaders and global capital, that for decades have violated
fundamental human rights in this region. Now is the time
for anthropologists to start asking new research questions
and to engage in the dialogue that their Arab interlocutors
have so articulately begun.

Talking to strangers

Guest editorial by Alexander Thomas T. Smith

In an address to Leicester University on 20 January 2011,
Baroness Warsi – a co-chairman of the UK Conservative
Party – remarked that prejudice against Muslims had
‘passed the dinner-table test’ and become socially accept-
able in Britain. ‘Anti-Muslim hatred and bigotry is quite
openly discussed’, the first Muslim woman to serve in the
UK cabinet went on to say, arguing that such prejudice
does not attract the same stigma as that directed towards
other religious and ethnic groups.1 Her comments were
widely reported in the British media, which picked up
on her argument that we all ‘need to think harder about the
language we use’.

In particular, Warsi warned against describing Muslims
as either ‘moderates’ or ‘extremists’, claiming that such
labels perpetuate misunderstandings about Islam. ‘It’s
not a big leap of imagination to predict where the talk
of “moderate” Muslims leads’, she said:

In the factory, where they’ve just hired a Muslim worker, the
boss says to his employees: ‘not to worry, he’s only fairly
Muslim’. In the school, the kids say ‘the family next door are
Muslim, but they’re not too bad’. And in the road, as a woman
walks past wearing a burkha, the passers-by think: ‘that wom-
an’s either oppressed or is making a political statement’. So we
need to stop talking about moderate Muslims, and instead talk
about British Muslims.

In the US, Warsi’s argument that labels and language
have political and social consequences was being echoed
in the aftermath of the shootings in Tucson, Arizona.
On 8 January 2011, a 22-year-old gunman named Jared
Loughner opened fire on Congresswoman Gabrielle
Giffords and two of her aides as she met with constitu-
ents at a supermarket. Six people were killed in the attack,
including a nine-year-old girl and a judge, and 13 were
wounded. Congresswoman Giffords, the wife of a NASA
astronaut who will captain the last voyage of the space
shuttle Endeavour later this year, was shot in the head and
has since been receiving intensive treatment at Memorial
Hermann Rehabilitation Hospital in Houston, Texas.

A fiscally conservative, socially ‘moderate’ Blue Dog
Democrat, Congresswoman Giffords had attracted a
strong Tea Party challenge in last November’s midterm
elections after supporting President Obama’s reforms of
US healthcare.2 Following the passing of that legislation
early in 2010, which provoked an acrimonious and divi-
sive national debate, Congresswoman Giffords described
in a television interview with MSNBC on 25 March 2010
her constituency office had been vandalized in the
middle of the night.

Asked about whether she thought Republican leaders
should have more strongly condemned such acts, she said
she felt it was important for those in leadership positions
more generally to be saying ‘We can’t stand for this’. She
went on:

the rhetoric and firing people up and, you know …. we’re on
[2008 Republican vice-presidential candidate] Sarah Palin’s
targeted list, but the thing is the way she has it depicted
has the crosshairs of a gunsight over our district. When people
do that, they have to realize that there are consequences to that
action.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, media
attention focused on Sarah Palin and, specifically, on the
extent to which the use of provocative imagery in her cam-
paign literature, including the online graphic of rifle cross-
hairs used in Congresswoman Giffords’ district, might
have been a contributing factor in the January 2011 attack.
The former Alaska governor, who is a possible presiden-
tial contender in the 2012 Republican primary elections,
responded forcefully: ‘Acts of monstrous criminality stand
on their own’, she said in a video posted on her Facebook
page just days after the Tucson shootings:

They begin and end with the criminals who commit them,
not collectively with all the citizens of a state, not with those
who listen to talk radio, not with maps of swing districts used
by both sides of the aisle, not with law-abiding citizens who
respectfully exercise their First Amendment rights at campaign
rallies, not with those who proudly voted in the last election.

In arguing that there was no causal relationship between
strident rhetoric and acts of violence, Palin might have
chosen her words more carefully, as she accused the
media of manufacturing a ‘blood libel that serves only to
incite the very hatred and violence [the media] purport to
condemn’. Jewish organizations, including the pro-Israel
lobby group J Street, asked Palin to retract her comment
and find a ‘less inflammatory choice of words’.3
Language – inflammatory or otherwise – and its political and social effects have long fascinated anthropologists (e.g. Bloch 1975; Merlan and Rumsey 2006; Paine 1981). But the debate about the potential consequences of political rhetoric that followed the Tucson shootings resonates with an enduring narrative of modern US politics: that America is more politically divided than it has ever been since the Civil War and that it becomes more polarized with each election.

In such a ‘toxic’ climate, it seems to many observers of US politics that bipartisanship and civility in political discourse have become endangered values. At a service held inside the McKale Memorial Center in Tucson a few days after the shootings, President Obama addressed a crowd of 14,000 people.4 ‘We cannot use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on one another’, he said:

Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let us use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and to remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.

The theme of the president’s speech – the value of empathy, humility, even tolerance, in the conduct of public life – could be articulated more explicitly as an argument for moderation.

Returning to the UK for the moment, I would suggest that Baroness Warsi is equally concerned with reasserting the importance of moderation in political discourse, although she might disagree with that assessment. What I mean by ‘moderation’ here is not moderation as it has become blunted with notions of centrum or ‘the middle ground’ of democratic politics, or as a default position defined by the absence of strong ideological or other convictions, which probably approximates the usage of ‘moderate’ that Warsi criticizes. Rather, the implicit argument of both Warsi’s and Obama’s speeches is for moderation as a (self-)disciplined engagement with divided publics, grounded particularly in sensitivity to the political uses and abuses of language.

Understood in this way, moderation is a particular kind of practice, conceived as a dialogue open to learning from others. It thus becomes more compellingly conceived as a powerful critique of ideological excess, a valuable resource with which citizens and communities can challenge bigotry and violent extremism. In this way, the potential for publics to be reconfigured and created anew as activist publics, capable of moderating politics, religion and the market, may be realized.

In her book Talking to Strangers (2004), the Princeton University political philosopher Danielle Allen argues for a citizenship of political friendship. Rather than viewing ‘strangers’ – often defined according to ethnic, racial or religious markers – as objects of distrust, she suggests that we should aspire to view other people, whether familiar to us or not, as potential friends. Friendship depends on trust, which in turn is made possible through sacrifice; by making sacrifices for our acquaintances we earn our trust and friendship.

Allen argues that Americans need to return to the opportunity made possible by the landmark Supreme Court decision in Brown vs Board of Education, which led to the dismantling of racial segregation in the US, in order to root out the seeds of distrust and enable a new citizenship of political friendship.

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Anthropologists have long been interested in the making of social relationships alongside the marking of difference and particularity. The interface between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ – or the ‘familiar’ and the ‘strange’, at home and abroad – has been constitutive of the discipline. Moreover, with its capacity to facilitate meaningful, sometimes surprising conversations, amongst people who might initially regard each other as ‘strangers’, ethnography and its reflexive traditions are well suited to those who seek to attend to, and remain mindful of, questions of language in the hope of (re-)making social relations and moderating the effects of inflammatory talk.

Such tradition should also enable us to apprehend anew the power of moderation. Unfairly caricatured as fair-weather friends by those promoting a more partisan politics, moderates can nonetheless extend their reach deep into (opposing) constituencies in ways unavailable to extremists. Inflammatory talk is therefore vital to those seeking to reinforce existing political and religious divisions, precisely because those same constituencies often face the constant threat of being moderated and tempered, both internally and externally. Militancy, after all, is exhausting.

From the perspective of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and other right-wing media commentators in the US, one must maintain a constant vigil against those individuals within one’s ideological ranks who fail in their commitment to the collective cause and are ready to reach out and forge relations with their opponents. I encountered many strident calls for vigilance while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the now-defunct (but recently active) ‘moderate’ wing of the Kansas Republican Party.

During the 2010 midterm elections, for example, one right-wing Republican candidate (Todd Tiahrt) accused his main opponent (Jerry Moran) in a closely fought primary to fill a Senate vacancy of being a ‘sporadic moderate’ who was ready to betray his self-proclaimed commitment to conservative principles at any opportunity. In response, those grassroots moderates who had been uncompromising in the contest rallied to Moran, who went on to win the statewide Republican primary by 5,000 votes. Of course, for those seeking to mitigate the effects of political and religious extremism, the challenge remains how to further harness such opportunities when they arise. But even when moderate voices seem absent from public debate, moderation continues to exercise a powerful presence in the (partial) imagination.●