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Autumn News

Charlotte Knowles on philosophers taking a political stand

The summer is supposed to be “silly season” puff pieces on dogs that look like Cliff Richard and people who grew giant potatoes only then to take them into the family home as a surrogate child. But the philosophy news from the last quarter has been far from silly, with political philosophers putting their politics into practice and philosophy teachers threatening strike action over a reduction in classes.

Firstly, we have Dr Konstancja Duff, now an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Nottingham, who was arrested by police in London in 2013 on suspicion of obstructing and assaulting a police officer. The incident occurred when Duff witnessed a 15 year old boy being stopped and searched by police on the Wilton Estate in Hackney, East London and attempted to hand him a legal advice card.

In the *Metro* Duff commented, “I was concerned about (the teenager’s) welfare, he was clearly distressed and I was also concerned about the problem – which is quite widely known – of racial profiling. I wanted to make sure he was aware of his legal rights around stop-and-search.”

Upon her arrest, Duff was taken to Stoke Newington police station, north-east London, where the custody officer on duty, Sgt Kurtis Howard, ordered a strip search of Duff on the grounds that she refused to give her name (which is not sufficient legal grounds for such action).

The Guardian reported that Duff engaged in “classic civil rights movement limp passive resistance”, which she saw as an appropriate response given her unjust treatment by the police: “I felt like what I had been arrested for was sticking up for somebody’s legal rights, trying to make sure that they were aware of them and trying to make sure that the police were acting in accordance with the law, as they should,” Duff said.

Duff engaged in “classic civil rights movement limp passive resistance”

Duff commented that “she suffered injuries to her arms, wrists and hands” as a result of the search, injuries that “hampered her pursuit of a master of performance degree at the Royal College of Music, and continue to cause her pain. She says she was carried through the custody suite with her breasts exposed by a paper suit that would not fasten properly.” Duff said that she still suffered flashbacks from the incident and was recently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, *The Guardian* reported.

Duff was later cleared of all charges, but pursued a complaint about her arrest “first

to the Metropolitan police and then the police watchdog, then known as the Independent Police Complaints Commission”.

In *The Guardian*, “describing the impact of the search, Duff said: “Being tied up, having my breasts and genitals touched by officers, my earrings ripped out ... I found that really humiliating and scary, and also being able to hear the male officers at the door and not knowing if they could see what was happening.”

In August 2018 *The Guardian* reported that Sgt Howard faced potential dismissal “for gross misconduct on claims that the search was unnecessary, that he ordered it without regard to whether it was necessary, that it was an unlawful order, and that he failed to treat Duff with respect and courtesy”.

However, at the disciplinary panel in August Howard was cleared when it was decided that he had no case to answer.

Speaking to *The Guardian* Duff commented:

“What I said precisely to the panel was: ‘You are endorsing the commonplace use of repressive and violating tactics like strip searching to punish and intimidate anyone who does not simply go along with being treated unjustly by police.’

“They are effectively saying: ‘This is our policy; Met police policy is to strip search anyone who stands up for their rights or the rights of somebody else.’

“This makes very clear that we are not dealing with one bad apple, they are closing ranks and saying this is Met police policy. That’s my sense of what this judgment means.”

Although the complaint was ultimately not upheld, one hopes that Duff’s research, which focuses on social and political philosophy, feminism, critical theory, philosophy of “race”, philosophy of law, German phi-

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losophy, and history of political thought, will help to make an impact on the unjust treatment of peoples at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them.

Across the channel in France philosophers are also taking a political stand, but this time regarding changes to the French curriculum. *The Times* reported that the baccalauréat (the French high school qualification), which the newspaper described as “an ordeal that has changed little since Napoleon Bonaparte introduced the baccalaureate in 1808”, is due for an overhaul in 2021.

The curriculum and exam -- in which students “wrestle with choosing a single question from a limited selection including ‘Is desire the mark of our imperfection?’ and ‘Can experience be misleading?’ or critiquing texts from Schopenhauer, Mill or Montesquieu”, *The Daily Nous* reported -- will still feature philosophy, but the teaching hours dedicated to the subject are going to be cut in half, from eight to four hours per week.

The Daily Nous stated that teachers were unhappy with the proposed changes, arguing that “Four hours a week is far too little to learn the skills demanded of *la philosophie*... More than 120 teachers signed a protest letter to Jean-Michel Blanquer, the education minister, last month and hardline defenders of philosophy are talking of strike action.”

The proposed changes to the baccalauréat are supposed to encourage specialisation in students’ academic careers and, as *The Local* reported, this would mean that students “would choose two specific ‘major’ subjects as well as two ‘minors’ alongside the standard curriculum – a system that will sound familiar to American college gradu-

ates. And instead of being based purely on results in the final exams, the new Bac grade would incorporate marks and test results obtained throughout the two final years of school.”

But as *The Local* went on to state, “critics say students will be forced to make career choices at too young an age. And the ideal of scholastic equality is also at risk ... since wealthier students will probably be better prepared to navigate the choices now open to them than those in poorer areas. Increased tutoring is supposed to limit that risk, but many educators aren’t convinced: at least one teachers’ union has called a strike against the new text for February 6th.”

In a UK context it seems almost unimaginable that there could be 8 hours compulsory philosophy a week taught in schools, despite the noted benefits of teaching this subject and the positive impact it has in developing students’ skills across the curriculum. So, on those grounds, I wish our French comrades well in fighting the good fight and continuing to flood young minds with philosophical ideas, for if philosophy is slowly eased out of the French curriculum, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Charlotte Knowles is a postdoctoral research fellow in ethics, social and political philosophy at the University of Groningen, where she researches in feminist philosophy and phenomenology.