

We Just Talk!

Column for the Danish Daily Politiken

By Jeanne van Heeswijk and Rasmus Ugilt

Public faculty no. 5 took place at Købmagergade next to the postal museum and across the street from a clothing boutique. Public Faculty no. 5 (PF5) was not a protest, nor was it a work of art, even though it took place in conjunction with the Copenhagen Art Festival. It was simply a standing invitation for anyone passing by to have a discussion about the current economic situation. Most of them kindly rejected the invitation.

But some accepted. They often did it with a certain degree of scepticism – “Who do you represent?” “What are you protesting?” “What do you want?” A few were downright aggressive. Even still, we can say, and not without a certain pride, that a great number of people stopped by and ended up taking part in a meaningful conversation about an issue that is of crucial importance for the spot, where we stood, for the people, who took part, and indeed for all of us.

Public Faculty no. 5 set out with a Dutch artist and a Danish philosopher setting up a secluded area for conversation with the public, a group of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants hired to stand around the area holding sign saying things like “Do not pension the world” and “Where did the money go?” – slogans that were suggested to us in the many conversations that took place throughout PF5. One sign, we ourselves made from the beginning, said: “I make 70 kr pr. hour doing this. Wanna sign up?” We didn’t really expect it to do much more than make

people reflect upon the life-world of the sign-carriers seen every day at Strøget and Købmagergade, but as it turned out, quite a few did in fact want to sign up.

A Frenchman in his early sixties, who had been working for years as a social worker in Denmark, and who had recently been fired, told us that he was desperate enough to sign up for many things and that the job, we were offering, seemed to be a very good gig. He worked for us the entire four days holding his sign and discussing with plenty of people passing by. A distinguished elderly man holding a sign for 70kr pr. hour seemed to beg a lot of questions.

A Norwegian psychologist took so much interest in our project that he stayed and helped with the conversation the whole week as well. He too was paid 70 kr pr hour. Many others, some quite desperate, asked if they could sign up. We had neither the budget nor the number of signposts required to sign them all.

[picture of conversation]

Talk is cheap

That being said, there might still be a certain form of scepticism lurking somewhere in the back of the reader's mind. The general form of this scepticism could probably be formulated as follows: "So, you have had some success engaging a few hundred people in a conversation about economy, and in doing so you have employed a few people at a salary below the minimum wage for most professions in Denmark. The conversations will be quickly forgotten. No politicians or other people in power will have heard of your efforts. Tell us again: What is it you think you have achieved?"

It's not a bad question. Why bother with the considerable effort it takes to speak to complete strangers in the street? Do we not have established institutions, where this type of debate has its proper setting? Could one not have involved a lot more people online? Indeed, as one passer by commented: talk is cheap.

Here we must disagree. Talk is not cheap. It is dear. If anything, the event of Public Faculty no 5 has proven that much. We have had complete strangers sit and talk for more than two hours about the state of their business, or about the possible economic recovery of Greece, and about the current regime of austerity measures, which seem to be the most common way in which politicians and economists from left to right propose to meet the crisis. We have spoken to diehard Marxists, neo-liberals, conservatives, deep ecologists etc. We had people with the most conflicting views imaginable engage in a respectful conversation with each other, people who would have never met, and who probably would have never engaged in a discussion with strangers with opinions so far from their own, had it not happened at PF5.

Still, for all the differences of opinion represented, we can nonetheless say that a crucial tendency was predominant in all the people we met: a deep-rooted concern, a most profound feeling of insecurity, a feeling that something is rotten, not just in the state of Denmark, but in general. And furthermore, while most felt incapable of fully comprehending the details and the scope of the problems, we are faced with in the current crisis, almost everyone agreed that the established political and economic institutions only seem to be truly capable of one thing: vehemently denying the extent to which they are miserably failing. After all: how many bank-packages will it take to finally save the banking sector? How many austerity measures will be needed to pay off the debt? And where, in the end, did the money go?

[picture of where did the money go sign]

Anxiety for the public

Perhaps the clearest evidence for the fact that these questions are nagging, but constantly lacking any kind of legitimate answer, is found in the fact that people are really put off by the prospect of having to discuss the economy. As one participant commented “Most people would probably tell you about their sex-life sooner than having a meaningful discussion about the economy.”

As we set out we planted a sign with the question “What does economy mean?” right next to our base. The result was that we only managed to start a single conversation for several hours – with a gentleman who felt confident in informing us that ‘economy’ originates in the ancient Greek term *oikonomia*, which means the management of the household. Even though the conversation was both poignant and interesting, that was the moment, we swapped the sign saying, “What does economy mean?” for one that said, “We just talk.” We might have considered writing “This is not your chance to be exposed on national TV!” or “We mean you no harm!” We really just wanted to talk.

From that moment on, people seemed much more inclined to engage in a conversation. It was as if they had to be conned into speaking about an issue as “dangerous” as the economy. We believe that what we encountered here was a genuine form of anxiety for the public. When speaking to strangers we are quite comfortable engaging in all sorts of private topics, i.e. sex, tastes in music, preferences about football players, things that are on offer in the shop down the road. But issues that are of genuine public concern, such as the general state of the economy, seem to put people off. As long as we can keep the theme to something that can fit within some kind of consumerist universe, we are all right;

we can discuss our particular preferences – I like tea, you like coffee, I like Brøndby, you like FCK, I like gay sex, you are more into hetero, etc. – and have no problem with a “public” conversation, but when we are confronted with an issue of genuine public relevance, we shy away.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant gave a definition of the public use of reason in 1789 that is still surprisingly relevant for the consideration of this kind of anxiety for the public. His general idea was that the distinction between public and private has nothing to do with the number of people engaged in the conversation – it may be 2 or it may be several million; nor is it of great importance where the conversation takes place – at home, in parliament, in the city centre; it is not even particularly important, who is doing the talking – it may be a beggar or a king. The crucial question about the distinction between public and private is rather settled with regard to the one, on behalf of whom, one speaks. This means that for Kant a private use of reason is what one engages in when one speaks on behalf of a position in society. Genuine public use of reason is only what one engages in, when one speaks on behalf of “whom-ever” – Kant would simply say that it is what takes place when one speaks on behalf of reason itself.

It is precisely this idea of a genuine universality, a universality that is simply for all, that is not underwritten by a particular kind of taste or a certain position in society, which is the object of the most intense scepticism. In short it is precisely a universalism which has the audacity to claim that it is beyond the marked, that it indeed does not represent the interests of some group or other.

If it is to be said that the private sphere has colonised the public – and nowhere is that more evident than on Købmagergade, where there are shops aplenty, but rarely any public debate – the gravest problem is precisely this: that a genuine

Kantian notion of the public use of reason seems to have become increasingly impossible. Whenever someone speaks, we immediately ask: which secret agenda is she advancing? If what he is saying were to be effected, who would be the real beneficiaries?

Perhaps this simply is the result of the final triumph of the economic use of reason over public use. But if that is the case then we have all the more reason to engage in conversations of the kind that we had during public faculty no 5.