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Public Talk and Civic Action: Education for Participation in a Strong Democracy

National Information Center

Benjamin R. Barber

Civic education programs have always played a distinctive role in the American education curriculum. For the most part, however, civic education has been associated with civic *knowledge* and the cultivation of a *cognitive* faculty thought to be identical with political judgment (private judgment on public issues).

Perhaps this has been appropriate to a society which understood democracy primarily as a system of accountability in which elected representatives do most of the actual governing and "citizens" limit themselves to the passive roles of voter and watchdog.

Yet if democracy is to sustain itself, a richer conception of citizenship is required that meets the test of what may be called *strong democracy*. Strong democracy is not simply a system whereby people elect those who govern them, but a system in which every member of the community participates in self-governance. It entails not merely voting and overseeing representatives but ongoing engagement in the affairs of the civic community at the local and national levels. Citizenship defined in this strong manner is far more burdensome and far more meaningful than the thin version with which we tend to be content.

Oscar Wilde, himself a socialist, complained that the great defect of socialism was that it took up too many free evenings. Much the same may be said of strong democracy. Perhaps that is why it requires a more forceful dose of civic education and civic experience than its weak representative cousin.

If the point were just to get students to mature into voters who watch television news diligently and pull a voting machine lever once every few years, traditional civics courses would suffice. But if students are to become actively engaged in public forms of thinking and participate thoughtfully in the whole spectrum of civic activities, then civic education and social studies programs require a strong element of practical civic experience—real participation and empowerment.

The Tasks of Citizens in a Democracy

The tasks of citizens in a strong democ-

racy should include debate and deliberation on policy, formulating agenda, developing a faculty for making public judgments (and distinguishing them from self-serving private judgments), participating in referenda, serving in local and regional civic and political offices (PTAs, planning boards, town councils, neighborhood associations, community boards, arbitration panels, and juries), supporting and working for political parties and public interest groups, as well as voting. Active citizens engaged in such a range of activities must also learn how to engage in political or public talk, which is quite different from engaging in private talk, scientific talk, and many other useful—though comparatively private—forms of conversation. Political talk is talk in common among a community of citizens about common issues—the public good, for example.

Sustaining Active Participation

Programs in civic education must find ways to sustain active participation and promote public forms of civic talk. That will require moving beyond traditional classroom models of the active teacher talking *at* passive students *about* the virtues of good citizens. We need programs that require students to perform community service, that empower them in pertinent school decision-making processes, that give them practical political experience, and that make them responsible for developing public forms of talk and civic forms of judgment. These will not be found in civics lessons alone. If we can develop such a curriculum, it will be a powerful incentive to citizenship, for it will provide an education that is aimed not only at participation but works through participation.

Inasmuch as participation in public talk and action is at the core of strong democracy and strong citizenship, I offer a few comments on the nature of civic talk. I hope these comments may provoke further thought on what would constitute an adequate civic education program.

Talk has been central to the Western idea of politics since Aristotle identified *logos* as the peculiar social faculty that separates the human species from animals.

Modern representative democrats maintain the close identity of politics and talk, but they do so by reducing talk to the dimensions of their smallish politics and turning it into an instrument of symbolic exchange between avaricious competitors who are seen as having only private, animal interests.

The kind of talk required by strong democracy is much richer and is characterized by creativity, variety, openness and flexibility, inventiveness, capacity for discovery, subtlety and complexity, eloquence, potential for empathy and affective expression, and a deeply paradoxical character. All these features display our complex human nature as purposive, interdependent, active, political beings. It is capacity for this kind of talk that educators need to nourish in students.

Characteristics of Public Talk

The sort of talk that is truly public includes four important characteristics. First, it entails listening no less than speaking. Second, it is affective as well as cognitive. Third, its intentionalism draws it out of the world of pure reflection and into the world of participation and action. Finally, it is a public rather than a private mode of expression and thus depends on participation in communities of engaged citizens.

In considering the liberal idea of democracy as the politics of interest, one finds it easy enough to see how talk might be confused with speech and speech reduced to the articulation of interest by appropriate signs. Yet talk as communication obviously involves receiving as well as expressing, hearing as well as speaking, and empathizing as well as uttering. The reduction of talk to speech has unfortunately inspired political institutions that foster the articulation of interests but that slight the difficult art of listening. It is far easier for representatives to speak for us than to listen for us (we do not send representatives to concerts or lectures), so that in a predominantly representative system the speaking function is enhanced while the listening function is diminished. The secret ballot allows the voter to express himself

but not to be influenced by others or to account for his private choices in a public language. The Anglo-American adversary system, expressed in legislative politics, in the judicial system, and even in the separation of powers into contending branches, also puts a premium on speaking and a penalty on listening. The aim in adversarial proceedings is to prevail—to score verbal points. In fact, speech in adversary systems is a form of aggression, simply one more variety of power. It is the war of all against all carried on by other means.

"I will listen"

The participatory process of self-legislation that characterizes strong democracy attempts to balance adversary politics by nourishing the art of listening. "I will listen" means to the strong democrat not that I will scan my adversary's position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs, nor even that I will tolerantly permit him to say whatever he chooses. It means, rather, "I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike."

Good listeners may turn out to be bad lawyers, but they make adept citizens and excellent neighbors. Liberal democrats tend to value speech, and are thus concerned with formal equality. Listeners, on the other hand, feel that an emphasis on speech enhances natural inequalities in individuals' abilities to speak with clarity, eloquence, logic, and rhetoric. Listening is a mutualistic art that by its very practice enhances equality. The empathetic listener becomes more like his interlocutor as the two bridge the differences between them by conversation and understanding. Indeed, one measure of healthy political talk is the amount of *silence* it encourages, for silence is the precious medium in which reflection is nurtured and empathy can grow. Without it, there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries. The very idea of rights—the right to speak, the right to get on the record, the right to be heard—precludes silence. The Quaker meeting carries a message for democrats, but they are often too busy articulating their interests to hear it.

Affective and Cognitive Modes of Talk

A second major requirement of talk in a strong democracy is that it encompass the affective as well as the cognitive mode. Philosophers and legal theorists have been particularly guilty of overrationalizing talk in their futile quest for a perfectly rational world mediated by perfectly rational forms

of speech. They are forever trying to domesticate unruly words with the discipline of logic, trying to imprison speech in reason, trying to get talk not merely to reveal but to define rationality. This verbal eugenics, in which justice is produced by the controlled breeding of words, threatens to displace entirely the idea of justice as the product of political judgment.

The philosophers are not really the primary culprits, however. They follow even as they lead, and if they have not always recognized, in Kolakowski's words, that "man as a cognitive being is only part of man as a whole," it is in part because the political realists have persuaded them that man as a creature of interest is the whole man and that the rationalization of interest is the philosophical task that needs doing. The philosophers can hardly be blamed then for developing notions of rationality rooted in instrumental prudence and notions of justice legitimized by enlightened self-interest. How can speech be anything but cognitive under these circumstances?

Stripped of such artificial disciplines, however, talk appears as a mediator of affection and affiliation as well as of interest and identity, of patriotism as well as of individuality. It can build community as well as maintain rights and seek consensus as well as resolve conflict. It offers, along with meanings and significations, silences, rituals, symbols, myths, expressions and solicitations, and a hundred other quiet and noisy manifestations of our common humanity. Strong democracy seeks institutions that can give these things a voice—and an ear.

Complicity of Talk in Action

The third issue that liberal theorists have underappreciated is the complicity of talk in action. With talk we can invent alternative futures, create mutual purposes, and construct competing visions of community. Its potentialities thrust talk into the realm of intentions and consequences and render it simultaneously more provisional and more concrete than philosophers are wont to recognize. Their failure of imagination stems in part from the passivity of representative democratic politics and in part from the impatience of speculative philosophy with contingency, which entails possibility as well as indeterminateness. But significant political effects and actions are possible only the extent that politics is embedded in a world of fortune, uncertainty, and contingency.

Political talk is not talk *about* the world; it is talk that makes and remakes the world. The posture of the strong democrat is thus

"pragmatic" in the sense of William James's definition of pragmatism as "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts." James's pragmatist "turns toward concreteness and adequacy, toward facts, toward action, and toward power . . . it means the open air and possibilities of nature; as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretense of finality in truth." Strong democracy is pragmatism translated into politics in the participatory mode. Although James did not pursue the powerful political implications of his position, he was moved to write: "See already how democratic [pragmatism] is. Her manners are as various and flexible, her resources as rich and endless, and her conclusions as friendly as those of mother nature." The active, future-oriented disposition of strong democratic talk embodies James's instinctive sense of pragmatism's political implications.

We have demeaned the idea of citizenship in America by reducing citizens to clients of bureaucracy—passive consumers of political services. Too often we conceive of ourselves as private individuals with private interests whose civic responsibility goes no farther than letting the political bureaucracy know what we want. The chief political question asked by most politicians is, "What do you want? Tell me, vote for me, and I will deliver!"

Public Talk

Yet when we use the language of "I want" we are not using the language of citizenship. The civic question is not what I want but what will benefit the community. Public talk is thus a form of public thinking rather than private thinking and it can be undertaken only in a public setting where citizens debate and deliberate together. Genuine public judgment simply cannot be developed sitting in a room by oneself. It is the product of civic interaction and requires a capacity for imagining oneself in the situation of others that is possible only where a public is assembled. It is best taught by permitting students to interact together as a group over a question of common concern in a setting where the participants are empowered to make real decisions. Learning to talk or learning to judge is not yet learning to talk in a public discourse or to develop the art of public judgment.

What these four characteristics of public talk suggest is that, in a strong democracy, civic education will be indispensable to liberal education. Indeed, all education to

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the extent that it helps students become thoughtful, deliberating, critical, participating members of extended communities of learning and living is an exercise in civic education.

Once educators understand that, civic education can advance from its position as a pedagogical subsidiary of social studies to its true role as the very core of liberal education. Where participation and learning meet, where cognitive and experiential skills join in forging mature responsible human beings, there both the arts and sciences and the cherished virtues of democracy are served in common.

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