

Over the last several elections, the character of political discourse in America has seemed more and more like a shouting match, a ceaseless antiphonal ranting that seems only to serve the media's need for a story or the politician's aspiration for power. The most important and consequential issues of the day are presented in, and all too often decided upon, what amount to slogans or clichés—observations and opinions rendered within ten-second sound bites and manifestoes published in the latest direct mail copy or in paid political advertisements in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. The shrill tone and clichéd content of much public discourse seems to leave little space for complexity, subtlety, and seriousness in public discussion.

It is not as though the past is any model for the present. One doesn't have to look very hard to find evidence that public discourse in the past was, perhaps, as rough then as it is today. For example, Federalist editors spoke of Jefferson as a “cold thinking villain whose black blood always runs temperately bad.”¹ It was said that if he were elected president, “the seal of death is that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of the Goddess of Reason, will preside in the Sanctuaries now devoted to the Most High.”²

Still, in our day, the intensity of polarization seems greater than in the past, if only because the electronic media won't let us ignore it. Should we be alarmed by this turn? Why does it matter and why should we care?

The reason is simple: in a democracy, we agree not to kill each other over our differences. We choose, rather, to engage each other in open, public, substantive discussion and debate. The operating assumption is that we can work out disagreements through persuasion rather than coercion. Public discussion, debate, and argument, then, are at the heart of America's great political experiment in self-rule.

It is not just that we talk—how we talk is every bit as important. The reason is that language both reflects and shapes social reality, framing how we think about experi-

¹ James Melvin Lee, *History of American Journalism* (New York: Garden City, 1923) 104.

² Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 260 Years, 1690 to 1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1950) 168–9.

ence. The means by which the dialectic of public discourse takes place, then, shapes the nature and formation of political reality. Thus, democracies are deeply affected by the kinds of public discourse that occur within them.

One way to highlight the significance of this point is to recognize that all democracies are not the same. There is an important difference between “forms of government” and “forms of power.” Democracy, like monarchy, is a form of government. But democracy can be despotic in the way that it exercises power, particularly when democratic processes become shallow, rather than substantive; thin, rather than thick.

Thus, when shallow, democracy tends to repress, minimize, or even ignore conflict altogether. Substantive democracy, by contrast, is not only consonant with the idea of conflict, it depends upon conflict and the frank recognition of difference that it implies. The crucial premise to a substantive democracy is that consensus or moral agreement should not necessarily be the first and most urgent priority of a social and political order, particularly if that consensus is achieved by compelling people to compromise their most passionately held beliefs and commitments.

At the same time, when democracy is shallow, public discourse becomes a kind of language game that has the form of meaningful communication, but is in fact merely another manifestation of aggression. Sound bites and direct mail, for example, require no accountability to the public and provide no possibility of a meaningful public response. Debates in which opponents do not respond to each other and in which points and counterpoints are constrained by 60-, 90-, and 120-second time frames truncate substantive deliberation. The technologies of public communication themselves distort meaningful discourse. Is it any wonder that contemporary public discourse becomes an unconcealed demonstration of symbolic violence? In such an environment, public speech may become nothing more than a device for increasing power, a weapon facilitating the coercion of consensus.

How we talk, argue, discuss, and debate in public, then, matters a great deal. As many have said before: in a democracy, genuine disagreement becomes an accomplishment; authentic debate becomes a virtue. This is why we should be alarmed by the superficial and manipulative nature of American public discourse. Having said this, no one imagines that we can achieve the highest ideals of democratic practice any time soon. That, of course, doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to approximate them a little better than we do at present. Improving the character of public discourse, though, presupposes that we understand the problems and challenges that attend it. It is to this end that this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* is devoted: to move us in small ways towards a richer understanding of the issues facing us as we seek the virtue of authentic debate.

—T.H.R.