

Discourse and Democracy

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Political communities of all kinds are surrounded and saturated by discourse. Official pomp and metaphors legitimating the regime, subversive and conspiratorial murmurings, and the tensions and competing elements within these all have a solid place in the history of political institutions. But the connection between democracy and discourse is more specific, resting on a particular set of hopes about the relation of discourse to governance. Modern democracy is based on two hopes: first, that states subject to the public reasoning of citizens will be more good and just than those that are not (or will pose the least threat to goodness and justice), and, second, that by granting authority to persuasion, reason (or at least toleration) will replace coercion as a way of making peace between people with deep differences in a polity.

Philosophical and Social Origins of the Hopes for Discourse and Democracy

Discourse is central to the democratic vision of justice and peace. In his 1801 inauguration address, Thomas Jefferson declared: “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated as long as reason is left free to combat it.”¹ Jefferson stands in a long line of thinkers who have expressed their own visions of the democratic project of governance through rational discourse. Some of the most influential arguments for government through democratic discussion are listed below.

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Pedlen (New York: Random House, 1944) 299.

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This ideal of authoritative critical reason, however, has not been available at all points in history. As many of its early proponents argued, and as historians and sociologists have since shown, ideas about the role of rational discourse were dependent on the socio-historical contexts—the salon, the newspaper, and the city—that gave them space to develop and to acquire authority. Jürgen Habermas and Alexis de Tocqueville each argued, though in different ways, for the importance of particular associational and institutional forms to the origins of a democratic public—to what, since Adam Ferguson, we have called “civil society.” The following list of books includes both the philosophical arguments for and accounts of the emergence of institutions of discursive civil society.

- Ferguson, Adam. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. 1767; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
- Hamilton, Alexander, John Jay, and James Madison. *The Federalist Papers*. 1788; New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Howe, John. *Language and Political Meaning in Revolutionary America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. 1859; New York: Penguin, 1982.
- Nord, John Paul. *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Audiences*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Pasley, Jeffrey L. *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. 1763; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Seligman, Adam. *The Idea of Civil Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. 1840; New York: HarperCollins, 1988.
- Zaret, David. *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Discourse and Difference

Part of democracy’s promise is the claim that it will provide a context for discussion between those committed to radically different visions and ways of talking about the common good. However, to understand these differences as merely different philosophical positions is to ignore the messy and conflictual nature of argument in practice. In fact, discourse is not only a way of overcoming difference, but also a way of asserting and maintaining difference. Indeed, as George Steiner writes in his study of translation, “It may be that the agonistic functions of speech inside an economically and socially divided community outweigh the functions of genuine communication.... Social class-

es, racial ghettos speak at rather than to each other.”² The history of American democracy suggests that it is not immune from such divisive operations of discourse.

The democratic project of discourse for the purposes of persuasion and rational agreement, then, requires social discipline and the channeling of emotions and conflicts into constructive argument. Those taking up the theme of “deliberative democracy” represent one effort to specify how debate might be disciplined. The idea of deliberative democracy is as old as democracy itself, but renewed interest has been spurred recently by the political philosophies of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Rawls argued that the exercise of power by the state in a pluralistic society can only be justified through arguments that refer solely to commitments expected to be shared by all citizens. Public reason, in this account, is a “thin” mode of discourse aspiring to neutrality between the various detailed and “thick” understandings of the good that people actually operate with and the commitments they entail. Independently of Rawls, Habermas developed a similar understanding of public reason rooted in an ideal of communication and a discourse ethic based on this ideal. One strand of opposition to this program is represented by Michael Sandel, who argues that particular and “thick” notions of the good rooted in local communities are inescapable. Moreover, it is precisely these commitments that draw us into public life and cause us to believe that something is at stake. Thus, for Sandel, political discourse worth the name must involve consideration of precisely those commitments that are not shared by all citizens.

Other scholars have looked more directly at the social and cultural conditions under which a people can successfully discuss matters of common concern across their differences. This relates to the character of a democratic people—what Tocqueville called “mores,” and, in a phrase made famous by Robert Bellah and his co-authors, “habits of the heart.” Of central importance for these authors are the habits of civility and the social and cultural contexts necessary to sustain civility. The works by Hunter and Carter are, albeit in very different ways, reflections on the possibilities and challenges to civil public discourse in contemporary America.

- Benhabib, Seyla, ed. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Bessette, Joseph. *The Mild Voice of Reason: Deliberative Democracy and American National Government*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1997.
- Carter, Stephen L. *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. New York: Perennial, 1999.
- Fishkin, James. *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

² George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 33.

- ----- . *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Gutmann, Amy, and Denis Thomson. *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
- ----- . *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic, 1992.
- ----- . *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Macedo, Stephen, ed. *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Rouner, Leroy S., ed. *Civility*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000.
- Walzer, Michael. *Thick and Thin*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

Media and Discourse

The developments in media forms have long played an important role in expanding the potential range of communication geographically, socio-economically, and otherwise. The development of printing was profoundly important in creating the very notion of “the nation.”³ Scholars of democracy have seen the press as crucial to the formation of a democratic public, but they have also worried about the possible problems that certain forms and uses of new media might pose for democracy.

Walter Lippmann was among the first to see the challenges mass media posed to a democratic public. In *Public Opinion*, he argued that the power of technologies of persuasion rendered the notion of an informed public untenable. What democracies need in such a situation, Lippmann argued, is a cadre of intellectual elites who would not so much be subject to public deliberation and consent as deliberate among themselves and then create consent through technologies of persuasion. Lippmann's challenge that the ideal of reasonable, informed, and authoritative public discourse is inconsistent with social reality in the age of modern media lurks behind many of the books listed below. For instance, Postman argues that television, with its fast-paced entertainment orientation, necessarily trivializes important issues and ill-prepares citizens to discuss them. Gitlin uses the case of student protesters in the 1960s to argue that the organizational structure of the news media systematically filters and ultimately distorts the arguments of dissenting groups.

³ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

Another challenge posed by mass media is the more recent emergence of choice. As Cass Sunstein notes in *republic.com*, with the vast array of news choices on the internet, on television, and in print, it is increasingly possible to listen to opinions pre-selected to be consistent with your own, reversing the tendencies of the early newspapers to form a single, heterogenous, reading public. Since the 1940s, public opinion polling, public relations, and other techniques and technologies of image management have had increasing prominence, possibly contributing to this fragmentation of the public, though the extent of their impact is contested (see Jacobs and Shapiro below).

- Bishop, George F. *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls*. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Fallows, James. *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine Democracy*. New York: Pantheon, 1996.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Whole World is Watching*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Glasser, Theodore L., and Charles T. Salmon, eds. *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*. New York: Guilford, 1995.
- Isaac, Jeffrey C. *The Poverty of Progressivism: The Future of American Democracy in a Time of Liberal Decline*. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Jasper, James M. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.
- McChesney, Robert W. *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Monthly Review, 2004.
- Patterson, Thomas E. *Out of Order: An Incisive and Boldly Original Critique of the News Media's Domination of America's Political Process*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking, 1985.
- Starr, Paul. *The Creation of the Media: The Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic, 2004.
- Sunstein, Cass. *republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Public Intellectuals

Public intellectuals are defined less by their abilities than their positions. The people we call “intellectuals” are professionals in matters of opinion. They are not only paid to spend their lives crafting and presenting opinions; they also have a position within a system of distribution that allows them to make their opinions available in venues that command respect. Public intellectuals have a wide audience on a wide range of topics. The heyday of the public intellectual, we are told, was the 1950s, when Lionel Trilling, Hannah Arendt, and Daniel Bell strode easily across disciplines and topics to report on the present state of civilization. The number of intellectuals who can be heard so widely is inevitably quite small, and the competition for such positions intense, as David Brooks’ comic account of the intellectual marketplace in *Bobos in Paradise* entertainingly shows. Yet a more subtle aspect of a public intellectual’s role is the relationship of responsibility between the intellectual and the public. Public intellectuals can play an important part in facilitating public debate, clarifying positions, and reminding the public of the deeper issues at stake in news reports of daily events. But intellectuals are not immune from some of the same temptations to detachment, self-promotion, and pettiness faced by all public figures, nor from the narrow specialization encouraged by academic disciplines. Furedi, Jacoby, and Lasch argue that, for various reasons, these tendencies are particularly strong in our time, making truly public intellectuals increasingly rare. Bender highlights the shifts in the audience, especially its pluralization, that have also contributed to the decline of the public intellectual. The intellectuals who played an important role in the democratic revolutions of 1989 are a qualifying counter-example to this narrative of intellectual decline.

- Bender, Thomas. *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993.
- Brooks, David. *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Furedi, Frank. *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: Basic, 1987.
- Kumar, Krishan. *1989: Revolutionary Ideas and Ideals*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. New York: Norton, 1995.
- Rieff, Phillip, ed. *On Intellectuals*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1969.
- Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Pantheon, 1994.
- Walzer, Michael. *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the 20th Century*. New York: Basic, 1988.

Free Speech and the First Amendment

The first amendment protections of speech seem a matter of common sense in American culture, which is perhaps why it has been the exceptions and the limits to free speech that have been of most interest to scholars. Stanley Fish draws our attention to the social nature of speech and the inevitability of some form of social regulation, even for protected “free speech,” in order to claim that there is “no such thing” as free speech. More concretely, the limits to free speech are revealed through negotiating what Cass Sunstein calls the “hard cases”—those related to standards of decency, national security, and hate speech. Hate speech is a particularly interesting case as it highlights a tension between the liberal ideals of freedom and equality.

- Bollinger, Lee C. *Images of a Free Press*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Cohen-Almagor, Raphael, ed. *Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Tolerance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000.
- Fish, Stanley. *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech (and It's a Good Thing Too!)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Matsuda, Mari J., and Charles R. Lawrence, III. *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder: Westview, 1993.
- O'Neill, Robert M. *The First Amendment and Civil Liability*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Smolla, Rodney A. *Free Speech in an Open Society*. New York: Knopf, 1992.
- Sunstein, Cass R. *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*. New York: Free, 1995.

The Rhetoric of Public Discourse

One of the most widely commented on trends in public discourse is the tendency toward simplification, especially in characterizing the positions of others. As Jeffrey Scheuer notes, the “sound bite” has become an increasingly important genre of public discourse, even as its duration has become shorter. This is in part due to the intense competition for attention. The simplicity and emotional appeal of metaphors and narratives of a struggle between pure good and pure evil make them appealing in such a situation. The following books analyze the rhetorical structure of public discourse, with an emphasis on contemporary debates, though Albert Hirschman’s book shows that our forms of argument tend to fall into well-worn historical tracks.

- Adatto, Kiku. *Picture Perfect: The Art and Artifice of Public Image Making*. New York: Basic, 1994.
- Collins, Ronald K. L., David M. Skover, and Bruce Man. *The Death of Discourse*. New York: Westview, 1996.

- Hirschman, Albert O. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1991.
- Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *The Language War*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Sanders, Barry. *The Private Death of Public Discourse*. Boston: Beacon, 1998.
- Scheuer, Jeffrey. *The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999.
- Tannen, Deborah. *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*. New York: Ballantine, 1998.