



Deliberative  
Communication  
*and*  
Ethnopolitical  
Conflict

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# The Argument

THE FOUNDATIONAL LOGIC OF THIS BOOK IS THIS: FIRST, RESOURCES—BOTH material and symbolic—are not equally distributed amongst people. Individuals and groups differ with respect to personal abilities, talents, and environmental resources. Hence, groups are organized by unequal access to resources, and this makes for differences and the “politics of difference.” Second, the goal of politics is the management of these differences and to resolve conflicts. This means that a differentiated, culturally plural society is the norm and suggests group-differentiated policies. Third, groups—whether they are political, ideological, commercial, or ethnic—are in the business of expressing their demands in order to maximize the probability of obtaining desired outcomes. This means that politics is effectively communicative. In a democracy, communicative politics is a matter of expressing positions and making decisions about what will best serve the greatest number of people. This is true for conflicting groups (e.g., Israelis and Palestinians) as well as fully developed polities. In the pages to come I will develop an expanded notion of democratic communication. I will take seriously the four qualities of democratic communication (Gastil, 1992) and how they relate to the situation of divided societies. These are, first, that collective choices must be made deliberatively, that is, stated and defended. Secondly, members of divided groups must have equal opportunity to participate in various formats of interaction. Third, that conflicting

groups working on problems seek rationally motivated consensus. In other words, to find reasons acceptable to everyone that, as much as possible, represent a common good. And finally, democratic solutions are relational in that mutuality and individual respect are necessary for democratic discourse. Again, the challenge is to work out how these qualities can inform the resolution of problems between deeply divided groups. Such a conception of democratic discourse is, strictly speaking, idealistic but groups must strive for it.

This book makes the argument that there is a close relationship between principles of democracy, communication, and conflict resolution in ethnopolitically divided groups. Principles of democracy are assumed to be the most desirable and legitimate foundation for human relationships. These principles are logically related to a form of communication that we will develop throughout this volume. Democracy is a very popular and positive term. Almost everyone favors democracy but also believes that it is slow, difficult, and cumbersome. The normative ideals of democracy are attractive but the reality of living with others and working out problems is usually met with disparagement and pessimism. Still, we must stay with the idea that democratic processes are necessary and proper because the alternative is unacceptable.

I will assume a minimal understanding of democracy. This text is not a primer on democracy since numerous such volumes exist (cf. Dahl, 1998). Our concern will be focused on the relationship between democracy and communication and how this relationship translates into possibilities for conflict resolution. We assume that democracy is more desirable than its alternatives because (1) it guarantees individual rights, (2) ensures personal freedom, (3) guarantees associational rights, (4) requires the free flow of information, (5) is morally legitimate because principles emerge from participants in a conflict rather than leaders or authorities, (6) is best for guaranteeing self-determination, (7) fosters equality, and (8) requires a communicatively deliberative process to make decisions that emerge from the collective efforts of individuals. Democracy in particular states and political organizations is a continuum. There are different places along a democracy continuum from superficial to deep. In this book I am concerned with conflict resolution, problem solving, and justice. This means that any invoked democratic principles must be deep and serious. I am not very interested in simple majority rule votes, for example, in solving problems and then considering these to be democratic. This is a superficial notion of democracy. Many groups and nations describe themselves as democratic but really have very little commitment to the hard work of democracy.

It will be helpful here to briefly review the basic traditions of democratic theory for the sole purpose of understanding how deliberation and discursive participation in general, fit into these various traditions. The presentation of these

traditions is heavily reliant on work by Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002), who provide considerably more detail about the public sphere in democracies. My goal is to acknowledge the expected communication features of each tradition and stress a discursive perspective that will throughout this volume underscore a critical and contestatory approach that, I will argue, will be beneficial to the unique problems of ethnopolitical conflicts.

## Models of Communication and Democracy

A key philosophical issue in democratic discourse is the role of the individual, and this role is rooted in attitudes about individuals; that is, are they skilled and committed to the resolution of problems, or are they considered rabble who have little interest or capability for deliberation and problem solving? The *representative theory of democracy* (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht, 2002) recognizes the authority of individuals but assumes that the broader audience of a society requires skilled and knowledgeable people to represent them. People should vote on office holders to represent them. Conflict will be resolved by elected representatives who ideally reflect the perspectives of the larger group. Public discourse should be *transparent* in that elected officials reveal to the public what they are doing. The media can play a positive role by exposing corruption and other problems. It also should be *inclusive* in that contrasting perspectives should be equally represented. The media should seek balance and *proportionality* and work to frame issues fairly. Still, the media can exacerbate problems with bias and distorted information. They can glorify a conflict, take sides, or unfairly frame issues. The style of communication most associated with representative theories of democracy and communication is civil and detached. The cool and calm style of the professional political operative, who seeks to avoid passions and emotions, is preferred.

One of the problems with the representative model of democracy for deliberationists and divided societies is that the issues of serious moral argument are shifted out of the public and into legislative bodies. Representatives discount the very possibility of serious consideration of moral issues. They seek to domesticate moral disagreement by bargaining among equals (elected representatives) and getting people to agree on negotiated compromises that structure political outcomes. These negotiated compromises favor certain values, such as conflict management rather than resolution but prevent other values such as deeper consideration of issues. Problems with representation models are even more severe when considering minority ethnocultural groups that are typically a part of divided societies. These groups are usually challenging established power groups and even if they have a rep-

representative “voice” it is usually insufficient to offset the tendencies to maintain power. Moreover, social barriers such as discrimination depend on empowering less powerful groups through upward mobility and equitable political input. There is also a philosophical debate about how closely a representative must “mirror” his or her constituency. Can a “White” person represent properly a “Black” voting district? Can an Israeli-Jew represent a Muslim Arab?

A second perspective is termed *participatory liberal* by Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002). This perspective places slightly more trust in individuals and expects them to aggregate and organize their interests into powerful representative groups such as political parties and labor unions. Participation in discourse is ongoing, and individuals should remain members of groups that continue to deliberate and represent the interests of individuals. The organized discourse that emerges from institutions and organizations expresses the popular will and is more important than the good intentions of representatives. There is a strong belief from this tradition that participation in organized discourse helps belief preferences emerge. Individuals are transformed into a problem-solving community that utilizes common deliberation.

The liberal participatory tradition works hard to create an environment that maximizes diversity in terms of information and opinions. The media and other information outlets should be sites of representation for various interests. These information sites should contribute to the ongoing flow of engagement with information and try to avoid treating participants as passive spectators. This means that access to the media by ordinary citizens must be encouraged rather than relying only on those with particular credentials and training. The concept of open participation by its very definition implies that there will be those who have access to the media even though they lack expertise. This sort of empowerment continues to transform individuals into engaged contributors to solutions. It is a particular power of media rather than political parties because political parties often foreground their own interests in order to maintain power. This perspective is quite consistent with conflict theories because it assumes that political differences are produced by social, political, and psychological inequalities and that these inequalities are challenged by mobilization. When people organize to address their own interests they play a role in responding to injustices and mobilizing awareness and the media discourse that facilitates the resolution of conflicts.

When groups organize to protect interests there is typically a loss of civility. Organizations such as unions and political groups must rally the masses so polemical speech and passionate emotional expressions play a key role in the nature of participatory liberal discourse. In fact, civility in speech is sometimes criticized as a style that does little more than reproduce the conditions of inequality and should be

replaced by intellectual clarity and substantive engagement. Emotional expressions such as Obama's "Yes we can" foster inclusiveness and stimulate participation. But on the other hand, emotional slogans to rally the populace are a far cry from the deliberative ideal and critical reflection. Conservative talk radio currently capitalizes on emotional slogans to stir listeners rather than inform them. Clearly, there is room for both civility and passion in the participatory tradition. Social movements can be passionate and stir unhealthy emotions, but they remain important because they enter issues into a debate that influences official power holders. One danger is that social movements become solidified and pursue endless conflicts over issues because this is their reason for being.

A third perspective is *discursive* and holds fast to the intuitive ideal that has participants reasoning together through public arguments. It is the perspective most consistent with the one in this volume and is very communication oriented because it argues that the incommensurability that characterizes human and group relations is only managed through discourse. This is Dryzek's (2000) resolution to the problem of differences; that is, democracy is discursive rather than constitutionalist and differences between groups are worked out through contestatory discourse. Habermas's public sphere is also paramount here because important issues must be confronted by a variety of participants and not those only in public power. Political parties and the media (see chapter 5) are important for contributing to political discourse but normatively significant matters must reach beyond these institutions. Habermas is concerned that the "life-world" of citizens finds its way into political discussion, that participants in a deliberation represent only themselves so their communication is free from the burdens of organizational constraints.

Contestatory discourse has the conceptual advantage of dealing with multiple and recalcitrant discourses that require engagement. Identity conflicts in particular must manage discourses that are rough and uncivil such as racist discourse. Israelis and Palestinians clearly contest each other's ethno-political discourse, and this contestation is necessary if the two sides are going to construct a cooperative discourse. As Dryzek (2000) and others have proposed, contestation is different from deliberation but they are complementary. Two groups in an identity conflict will communicate in the form of contestation that exposes issues and points of similarity and difference. And this contestation is part of the broader sense of deliberation advocated here. Essentially, authentic deliberation only requires communication that induces reflection and creates will in a non-coercive manner. Manipulation, power, propaganda, and deception are not deliberative but might be part of the discursive nature of a group. Deliberation is effective and authentic to the extent that it influences collective outcomes. Rhetoric and alternative idioms of communication are necessary to reach across boundaries and influence those who subscribe to differ-