Review

Dialogue, politics and gender

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How could dialogue ever be bad for politics? Whether it is being proposed as a counter to the mindless aggregation that equates democracy with simply counting votes, as something that breaks down entrenched hostilities, opens up the agenda to a wider range of voices, enables cross cultural communication or helps us arrive at better informed decisions, more dialogue must surely be better than less. The starting point for this fine collection is that things aren't that simple. When calls to dialogue are framed by Habermasian discourse ethics – and even, as Kimberley Hutchings argues in her essay, by Seyla Benhabib's analysis of the relationship between the generalised and concrete other – they can impose an 'assimilative universalism' (p. 97) that requires all participants to start from roughly the same premises, or assumes that they will eventually do so. When the rules of dialogue already commit us to certain practices of reasonableness – certain ways of relating to the other participants, certain ways of responding to disagreement – they may already be committing us to too much. And although the very notion of dialogue implies at least two distinct positions, the dream of ultimate consensus too often hovers in the distance. For Martin Leet and Roland Bleiker, for example, '“dialogue”, seen as a way of remedying the exclusion of difference, has also been caught up in the slipstream of the sometimes violent longing for an ideal state' (p. 125). From their perspective, 'Habermasian discourse is shot through with an overriding need to reach consensus for the sake of the more highly regarded value of social integration' (p. 126).

The figures that stalk the pages of this book – Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler – are mostly associated with feminism, hence the prominence given to gender in the title, and the (not entirely shared) assumption that progress on these issues is most likely when informed by feminist critiques. Thus, Diana Coole explores the corporeal aspects of communication as a way of enriching the otherwise austere Habermasian version; Barbara Fultner draws on Young to explore perspectival difference as a resource in democratic dialogue; Terrell Carver draws on Butler to explore the nature and limits of agreement (though with a typically Carverian disclaimer, notes that it hardly matters whether his account is 'true' to Butler or not). The main exception to that otherwise shared assumption about the insights to be

derived from thinking about gender is a carefully argued – indeed very good – essay by James Gordon Finlayson, that retraces the Gilligan – Kohlberg debate that formed the backdrop to Benhabib's argument, and defends Habermas against her critique.

One of the many strengths of the collection is that it reads, itself, as a dialogue. The authors have been encouraged by the editor to engage with the other contributors, with the result that we can see clearly where the essays complement one another, and where the greatest areas of disagreement lie. This makes the book a model for edited collections, and enormously useful for students. It comes, arguably, at the price of too concentrated a focus on a limited body of literature (the references to Benhabib, Butler, Habermas and Young dwarf the references to anyone else), but that's rather a mean-minded objection. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it illustrates precisely the concern that motivates and underpins the collection: the worry that dialogue becomes possible only when those participating in it already share broadly similar reference points; and that what looks, in principle, like an opening up to diversity can become too much a discussion among friends.

The other worry – this is briefly addressed by Clare Chambers and Phil Parvin but is not so fully articulated in the collection – is that all the focus on dialogue can play down the significance of action. Including the previously excluded is not just a matter of letting them into the conversation. In fact, the question of letting them in rarely arises until they have first taken some action: disrupted meetings, chained themselves to railings, marched in the streets. The more typical speech act associated with such action is, moreover, a shout, and however much we may wish people would stop shouting and start arguing and listening, politics needs advocacy and partisanship as well as dialogue and deliberation. It needs the oppositional stubbornness that refuses to give up even when you are defeated in argument (the fact that your opponent is better than you in argument does not mean you have no case), as well as the willingness to shift ground. There is, in fact, a certain irony in the preoccupation with dialogue and reasonableness and being able to see things from the other's point of view at a time when one might more plausibly cite the decline in partisanship as what is hollowing out our democracies. Certainly in Europe, we seem more threatened by what Mair (2013) diagnoses as a decline in the citizens' identification with competing political parties and resulting disengagement from conventional politics; or Urbinati (2014) as the promotion of an unpolitical democracy that delegitimises political opinion (in all its bias and prejudices and roughness) in favour of expertise and 'truth'. The decline of partisanship – the lessening of a sense of being on a particular side – doesn't, it seems, usher in a world of mutual respectfulness and greater inclusivity. In some cases, it seems to lead to a generalised political passivity, in which unelected elites and charismatic leaders thrive.

It would be churlish to blame the theorists of dialogic politics for processes that have much deeper roots (though Mair gestures in this direction, and Urbinati even more so). It would be still more churlish to criticise a collection that takes as its explicit starting point the often exaggerated claims made on behalf of dialogue, and

subjects them to careful scrutiny. The focus on dialogue imposes its own limits, but you would be hard put to it to find a better collection for exploring the tensions between moral universalism and moral particularism, the complex ways in which dialogue can simultaneously enable and disable difference, the links and tensions between discourse ethics and dialogic politics, the promises and limitations of the latter. There isn't a single weak essay in this collection – itself an unusual achievement – and this book is likely to be widely read by students and academics alike.

References

- Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso.
Urbinati, N. (2014) *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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