KETTERING REVIEW

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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Speaking in Prose

by Ramón E. Daubón

"We no longer live in distinct little burgs. We live in multiple nested communities where familiarity decreases as it radiates out . . . disconnected communities, related to our work. . . . Each of these 'communities' will be a civic ecology of human interaction."

People don't just talk. They interact with the people they talk to; they relate. They relate with kin, friends, and acquaintances using one kind of talk. They talk differently to people who don't fall in those categories, people in other circles whom they may or may not recognize individually but who are yet seen as "on their level." And they talk to yet other people—and to disembodied institutional presences—who inhabit another planetary structure: actors with the impersonal authority to make things happen; government officials; store clerks; traffic cops. Of course the separating lines are ill-defined, blurry, and somewhat flexible. (Your bartender may become more like a friend or kin, and your confidences to him become more intimate as the night wears on.) But we relate to people in these three basic ways: to those in our circle of trust, to those in other circles, and to those connected to impersonal organizations or institutions, with authority, and who may remain unseen.

For each of these ways of talking we have a set of norms for what's appropriate—all rather well known, and applicable specifically to one or another of these settings. These norms apply to verbal as well as nonverbal communication: intonations, timing, phrasings, and "body language." The norms are heavily influenced culturally: this is the reason cross-cultural communication is wrought with peril and is taught in business and diplomacy schools. Wars can be started and deals ruined from a misconstrued word or gesture. Some people are naturally sensitive to these nuances, while others—we've all met them—can be clueless. Yet the effect of miscommunication can be unstoppable, even if sometimes bewildering.

In *public politics*—that is the relating among citizens attempting to deal with their community's issues of shared importance—the value of such communication is multiplied. It is socialized. We are unmistakably social animals: from our primate ancestors we inherited, as a survival mechanism, the skills of relating in a

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bonded group. This gave us power in a common defense; it allowed specialization of tasks such as hunting, gathering, and child-rearing; and it established an order of authority that held things together. The norms of relating, and the pecking order that came with it, were well known and there were mechanisms for handling challenges to either: chastising, expulsion, or accepted dethronement! We didn't even have to *enjoy* the company of those in our circle; we knew that we needed them and that they needed us. And we knew that *they* knew.

As clear as these rules was the notion also of who was *in* our circle, as *one of us*, and who *wasn't*. Outsiders—"*they*"—were recognizable but kept at a safe distance outside our circle of trust. We realized that we might need each other under some specific circumstance but we also knew that in a bind they would give priority to their own. Trust thus was likelier to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis ... and verified.

Over successive generations the survivor groups deepened and honed this innate and increasingly complex sense of tribe or community. We related to those within our comfort zone in some specific ways and to those outside in different ways. The *institutions* that ruled us

—family, kinship, tribe, neighborhood—and the norms that ruled them were simple but effective. They were also able to evolve autonomously in response to change—from within, as the size and composition of the group changed, and from without, as the natural environment was altered or the geography became more crowded. The process by which the norms *changed* may or may not have been conscious, but an unscripted interaction revealed that survival of the commons was best served by minute alterations, perhaps emanating from the most local levels or one-on-one interactions, but eventually bubbling up, by comparison and success, to a level sanctioned broadly by habit. Undoubtedly there was friction. People must have talked about the felt pressures to change, and about tensions brought forth by experimenting with it. (Change can be enticing but it is always irritating.) It probably meant speaking out of turn, or acting beyond the edge of the norm. But some things stuck. Consciously or not, choices were considered and made. People *deliberated*. We not only made decisions about relating and acting in different ways; we were possibly also able to alter the mechanisms and norms by

which decisions were made. People related in novel ways and maybe involved new people in their talk. With this unstructured deliberation we *evolved* politically. Unawares or not, like Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, we spoke in political prose.

As we advanced technologically and our "community" grew in size and intricacy, new layers of institutions emerged to manage it. Again the norms changed and new norms were created to deal with new realities; but survival of the commons remained the *organizing principle* in this emergent, adaptive complexity. To manage evolving change, a new set of relational rules was needed to deal with the ever-more-impersonal structures of governance. They emerged organically and were likely fed by a continuing process of deliberative trial and error —probably also with substantial violence flaring to deal with the tensions. In Darwinian terms, the best-structured burgs survived. To this day, and in our exponentially complicated world, we still aim to govern ourselves by continually evolving variants of those three basic sets of norms: to relate with those we trust, to others like us around us, and to the impersonal institutional actors that manage "the world out there."

This of course is by now an oversimplification. We no longer live in distinct little burgs. We live in multiple nested communities (family, neighborhood, town) where familiarity decreases as it radiates out. We also participate in disconnected communities, related to our work or to issues that absorb us, some of which (the office, village, e.g.) can be highly personalized, while others (say environmental or gay "communities") can be intense but highly institutionalized and impersonal. Nevertheless each of these "communities" will be a civic ecology of human interaction, with all

the characteristics of its more familiar biological counterparts, each with its rules of relating and perhaps in all three levels as described above. Still, in all of these cases, as the personalized level of comfort— the *social distance*—becomes less familiar the norms of relating will be different. Likewise, the norms in each specific case

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can evolve in response to changing circumstance: groupings of different interests or ethnicities can discover either affinities or conflicts and the ways of relating for these dispersed topical communities will change in response. In my personal experience, for example, diverse Hispanic and Asian national associations at one time forged bonds over the issue of "English only," leading not only to collaboration but to new cross-cultural language and norms. Similarly, Puerto Rican and Ukranian immigrants, engaged in turf battles over access to a major hospital in Chicago, led to stereotyping and tensions beyond the neighborhood between groups who would have otherwise been oblivious of each other.

The Harlem community in New York City is a real and complex case in point. It has a unique history and cohesion forged by a history of racial struggle and Afro-American artistic success. Yet Harlem in 2013 is being rapidly gentrified, drawing the ire of old-time residents not only because of rising property and rental costs but because the "soul" of the old community is being "watered down." Bereft of public ornamentation, the city assisted a couple of young artists to erect an iconic sculpture symbolizing rebirth near the intersection of Lennox Avenue and

125th Street, the main crossroads of the community. While most neighbors expressed pleasure with the addition, a number complained that the artists were Latinos and the piece symbolized the community's rebirth as something different.

Nevertheless, for simplicity in this analysis let us attempt to visualize a single compact geographical community and observe how people would talk politically in it. Envision first the borders of this imagined village. These will be imprecisely defined and porous enough to allow traffic in and out. Still, members in this community can recognize who belongs in it and who doesn't. And depending on the history and cohesion of the community, acceptance of immigrants into it will be easier or more difficult.

Inside these loose borders grows a whole menagerie of stakeholders. Most noticeable will be the three traditional "sectors" of community analysis: a government or public sector, a business sector, and an organized nonprofit sector. The three are typically presented as interlocking circles in a Venn diagram, with their relative sizes representing the relative strength of their presence in the community. Their overlaps too merit consideration: government often contracts out "public" services to businesses or to non-profits; business often engages in philanthropy and social responsibility in support of nonprofit, civic causes; and the latter often engage in commercial activities and frequently also volunteer to provide traditionally public services such as rehabilitation of public spaces or community policing. At the center of the triple intersection will be activities such as hospitals and universities that may be nourished by all three sectors.

Surrounding those three larger sectoral structures, and often partially embedded in them, are a number of "quasi" organizations that replicate activities of each of the former, although they may be either formally established or informal. Thus public ornamentation advisory commit-

tees or police auxiliary organizations complement the roles of the government institution they attach to. In the case of business, semi-formal and informal firms either complement, replicate, or unfairly compete with their formal counterparts. Likewise informal volunteer groups attach themselves as supplementary adjuncts to formal nonprofits. But in all cases, and through experience, each of these will have evolved a set of norms that guide their relationship with the parent sector, fluid norms that evolve through ongoing deliberative trial and error that adapts to changing circumstance and manages the practical tensions and conflicting values that may arise.

Unattached to the larger sectors, but constantly interacting with them as well as with each other, are innumerable autonomous associations, either formally structured or totally spontaneous, that occupy the great mass of the public space. These are coffee clatches, book clubs, and church choirs, Friday-night dominoes gatherings under corner lamp-posts in Latino neighborhoods, nail salon and barbershop habitual hangouts, Saturday sports leagues, neighborhood play-group parents,

and all the other associative opportunities, almost *ad infinitum*, where ordinary folk seek each other for mutual help, entertainment, comfort . . . and in passing to talk about things that concern them. *Civil society*, a term often mistakenly applied only to the organized non-profit sector, really resonates in this mass of

Civil society really resonates in non-formal associational civic life.

non-formal associational civic life. It is the civic equivalent of the dark mass and dark energy that account for the "missing" 96 percent of the mass of the universe. It is in this largely unorganized, mostly unstructured and totally unscripted and unpredictable "emergent space" that civic life is continually brewed: the cauldron of new civic values, the cutting edge of civic culture, the wetlands of a perennially evolving germ of democratic life, generally unavailable to the more rigid structures of the formal systems. Precisely because it is so free to change, change happens here first and is only—and subsequently —legitimized elsewhere, when it is allowed.

Each of these shapeless civic *blobs* (as distinguished from the formal organizational *squares*) is governed internally by a habitual pattern of interaction among its members, a particular set of norms that evolves as the blob . . . well . . . "blobs" along. Its internal rules deal with immediate issues of gender and family norms, of friendship, and of age- and class- and race-specific behavior. Each blob evolves and ends up tailored for what its members make it out to be. The social crucible of the family is ruled by clear gender and age-specific norms. The ladies in a beauty salon relate by age and status and by the ethnicity and social class of their attendants. The sports teams have clear gender and age lines. The rules are all very clear. In mid-America the waitress in the friendly diner can call her habitual male customers "honey" but the latter cannot return the complement in the same way. When change in these aspects begins to happen, in response to chance or circumstance, it will *first* happen here. And it will happen because someone, alone or in conversation with others, consciously or instinctively will weigh the need for doing things differently, deliberate its costs and its benefits, and as a result, perhaps, change the way he relates to those either in or outside his blob.

Then, finishing off the menagerie of stakeholders, finally, is a large number of unaffiliated free-floating individuals. They habitually bump against each other in the open space of this civic protoplasm, against the blobs and against the squares—be they public, business, or nonprofit. Times may join any of these, but they basically keep to themselves. Yet in all their contacts these free-agents are also vector carriers of the culture and may be purveyors of changed attitudes.

Among all the potential interactions, the most important in terms of political evolution are perhaps the interactions *among* the blobs, and *of* the blobs *with* the institutional space.

Such relations among non-intimates are the norms of public political culture. They offer a proper, recognized way of relating—to partial strangers in other blobs or in institutions—that enables public life either to function smoothly or to be a constant obstacle path. Not surprisingly this proper way of relating is called *civility*. These bridging connections between partial strangers, or those access links of individuals or groups with anonymous institutional actors, form the bedrock and may be the most important determinant of the effectiveness of public political life. Effective trust in the fundamental good intentions of *the other*, personal or institutional, is the basis of democratic public life. It requires trusting that the personal or institutional *other* has a stake in making the system work. Absent that basic covenant, hidden agendas will rule and the system will be functionally paralyzed.

Social and economic underdevelopment is in effect the result of an incapacity of individuals to come to joint understandings outside of their bonded trust groups and of the inability of the collective to come to trust the behavior of their institutions. This is where speaking in a conscious deliberative political prose becomes essential to democratic public life. In a society where relational norms have been built upon *mistrust* of the others' intent—or sadly, as in the US case, where that has been a recent trend—the ability to *hear the other* does not happen naturally. It must and can be encouraged by efforts and spaces devoted to that advancement.

Consider furthermore that formal organizations, with their prescribed rules and structures, are also peopled by individual citizens each with his own notion of formality, filtered through his own culture and set of values about what is appropriate. Even the most bloodless bureaucrat will not tow the organizational rulebook all of the time. A clear sense of institutional purpose will compel judgment, and an occasional bending of the rules in the service of that purpose. In fact "work to win" is an effective labor pressure stratagem where the employers' rules are strictly adhered to . . . but not an inch more! As no rulebook can contemplate the universe of possibilities that may arise in even the simplest industrial process, attempting to disallow all judgment by "sticking to the book" ends up paralyzing the process.

Therefore even in structured organizations it is the informal norms—including a commitment

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and sacrosanct respect for the purpose of the organization—that ultimately govern and make the system work. Decades-long efforts of development assistance for institutional strengthening, particularly for government and nonprofit institutions, have thus missed the mark; institutions can be strong by design, but lacking an

informal political covenant of purpose they will remain rigid, misutilized, and thus ineffective. Governance for human progress is not simply an engineering or management challenge; it rests on an implicit covenant of trust. That trust is built by a conversation among all the stakeholders, by socializing speech in a consciously deliberative prose.

All of the relational connections discussed here—within bonded groups, between them, and with (as well as within) formal organizations—*emanate* from individuals, *are generated* by individual needs, and *are filtered* by a composite of shared norms and values we recognize as *culture*. They are manifested in patterns of talk and behavior that are specific for each of these connections. Underneath the observable behavior, though, lie iceberg-like, layers of preconceived explanations and prejudices about *the other* in the relationship: of gender, age, and class, even within bonded groups; of reciprocal attitudes toward "other tribes" however construed; of people toward institutions; and of people *in* institutions toward people *out* of them. A different colored filter is applied, selectively, to each category of *another*.

These preconceptions are themselves built upon deeper motivations: on perceptions of power—either *by me* or *over me*—as an instrument of possibility to make things happen; of a constructed sense of one's interest, be it rational or visceral. And all rest on a fundamental sense of one's identity. A deliberative conversation among persons is capable of percolating to each of these levels, as it purveys new information and neurologically confronts the emotional *limbic* part of the human brain with its rational *frontal* part. Emotion deliberates within each person to counterpose values, prejudices, interests, and identity, generating on the surface a modified pattern of acceptable behavior toward and with "the other." We do it all the time in political prose. But most of the time we are not conscious of doing it. And like Molière's Jourdain, we might be grateful for realizing it and learning to do it better:

> By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that.

The trick is carrying the realization through.

Implicit of course is a theory of how change happens—that change emerges from the myriad interactions that innovate the way things are done. Change is not planned; it is typically an adjustment. It happens in response to minute alterations in the interaction of members in the social ecosystem; it happens from the tendency of all systems to address internal disequilibria, as each actor pushes for his interests and in the process generates a new disequilibrium which itself needs to be addressed; it happens because random external forces, resulting from connected larger political or natural systems, produce major disequilibria, needing readjustments at all levels. And it happens because conscious human decisions end up, authoritatively or by serendipity, introducing disarticulating noise.

This is *politics*, seen broadly as the collective of relationships that mobilize power to deal with issues of collective interest. Seen through our lens, politics would be inherently democratic as it self-organizes in the freely emergent cauldron of new ideas, where a hundred flowers bloom and the better ones

Where a hundred flowers bloom the better ones float to the top.

float to the top. Of course things typically don't happen that way. While new behavioral adjustments are constantly being born and essayed, most will run into the rigid constraints of engrained preconceptions; of an unequal distribution of power to effectively make things happen or ensure that they don't; of deeply vested interests with the muscle to resist change; and of a sense of identity, too often recognized at the expense of the identity of others. As a result, the civic prose that generates innovations may often not transcend its immediate surroundings, and decisions and adjustments will have to be made around the rigid rules. In the best case where the civic culture is committed to institutional probity, these parallel rules may serve to sustain the system; but such a generalized commitment cannot be assumed. In fact, creating this dedication is a challenge of democratic development: for absent this commitment the confrontation of emergent solutions against unresponsively rigid rules ends up producing a parallel ethos where opportunistic violation of formal norms becomes accepted practice. In this climate valuable institutions are delegitimized and corroded, trust in them deteriorates and corruption becomes endemic.

It is not enough to speak in civic prose to an uncivic audience. The latter must change. Institutions devoted to democratic development have for decades invested in advancing in their beneficiaries a capacity to give civic heft to these conversations, their *capacity to concert*. But these well-intentioned efforts of capacity building—*institutional development, participation, civic engagement, and co-production*—have too often misfired, resulting instead in an enhanced capacity for the interveners themselves to define the setting for conversation. Meanwhile, for decades the business community worldwide has seen its interest in investing in the civic quality of the communities where its markets, their workers, or their operations are located. Corporate *ethics* evolved into *corporate social responsibility*, *pro-poor* and *fair trade* corporate policies; *socially conscious entrepreneurship* spawned *conscious capitalism* which inspired legislation for *benefit corporations (b-corps)* and *flexible purpose* and *low-profit limited capability companies*.

All of these institutional interventions—of governments, development agencies, and companies engaged in civic encouragement—might yet conceivably end up emerging from a society where citizens have previously taken ownership and perfected their conscious capacity in governing themselves. But to the extent that such interventions occupy space that should be the sole domain of citizens they will not be instrumental in letting citizens determine the character of their own interactions. Left to their own devices citizens may well produce such mechanisms, as instruments for their own civic—and we now know, economic—advancement. But they will be their own instruments. Structured interventions by the institutional *squares* that occupy the civic miasma in our community image should therefore limit themselves to observing and only facilitating a space wherein the natural speaking in civic prose would be able to refine by itself its more lyrical political quality. Let the people speak.

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