The Evaporation of Politics in the Public Sphere

by Nina Eliasoph

“Citizens have to learn how to connect their personal lives to political issues.”

Examining everyday political conversation reveals an often ignored dimension of public engagement and disengagement, rebellion and acquiescence, curiosity and complacency. This seemingly shallow dimension is the intangible realm of unspoken political etiquette, where citizens delicately but very firmly establish a sense of what the public sphere itself is—of what can be questioned and discussed, where and how. In the contemporary American public sphere, paradoxically, what marks a context as clearly “public” is often precisely the fact that the talk there is so narrow, not at all “public minded.” The people I met wanted to create a sense of community, but did not want to talk politics. Though they did gather together, they missed a chance to ignite that magical kind of power that can sparkle between people when they self-reflectively organize themselves. Such reflection does not necessarily entail ignoring local, individual suffering or abandoning local hands-on projects. In the process of alleviating real people’s suffering, citizens could wonder aloud about the political forces that may have helped create that suffering. While building the playgrounds and selling tickets to the local Halloween fair, parents could casually talk about whatever came to mind, including politics. People could learn to use their collective imaginations to improve what they can improve—to lend a hand, but also an imagination. But civic etiquette made imaginative, open-minded, thoughtful conversation rare in public, “frontstage” settings. The more hidden the context, the more public-spirited conversation was possible; but politics has evaporated from public circulation.
A longstanding argument in political research declares that most people are just too dumb or narrow minded to be good citizens. These studies are both right and wrong: on the one hand, there is overwhelming evidence that most people simply do not know the most basic facts about politics. On the other hand, many fascinating studies show that being interviewed can make interviewees into thoughtful citizens; the interviews opened up free, unjudgmental space, maybe for the very first time in the interviewees’ lives, for talking through vague political ideas, playing with their ideas in the light of day; interviewees then could notice inconsistencies and begin to reconcile them.

This insight is one key to understanding how contextual political opinions are; and studies dramatically show that people are fully capable of becoming good citizens, if a social researcher who prods them with good questions should happen along. But these studies do not set out to ask how different real-life contexts called for different “hats,” or why so few contexts ask citizens to wear their “democratic citizenship” hat. Thanks to these studies, we know that the hats are in the closet; the next question is how people decide which ones to wear to which occasions.

Non-elites have good reasons for believing that what they say about politics does not matter: it usually does not. Political battles are usually pitched in favor of the people who already have money and power. But this simple explanation would not tell us why the people I met censored their own speech, even when they were far from oppressive institutions. The people I met assumed that powerful institutions would not pay attention to common citizens’ public-spirited talk; authorities’ long shadows deeply colored the kinds of conversations that groups had, even in seemingly unpressured, voluntary situations, seemingly far removed from official settings. They steered their attention toward problems and solutions that they felt they could address without challenging those authorities’ definitions of citizens’ proper role; they did so without the powerful institutions’ having to exert any direct influence at all.

Luckily, while those in power can monopolize wealth and material production, nobody can control all the tongues in the world. As culture scholar Steven Tipton tidily puts it, “social and economic circumstances influence our thinking, but they do not do it for us.” Whether actively challenging, actively embracing, passively embodying, or selectively transforming the seemingly rigid forces that surround them, citizens somehow have to enact a life within these institutions.
and have to make sense of their world. In the process of doing that, they create the organizations of civic life. And these organizations become a force in their own right.

Some of the more useful ways of thinking about power take inspiration from Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony,” that highlights the meanings that dominated people give to their circumstances. This focus on meaning-making offers a way of understanding how oppressed groups have accepted or transformed their political powerlessness. According to this line of thought, practical, everyday knowledge and intuitions actively but implicitly connect people’s ideas to the powerful institutions around them; the way people make sense of everyday experience usually discourages them from thinking thoughts that might challenge the status quo. A society’s political imagination is, according to this explanation, patched together in a way that makes domination seem natural and inevitable, odorless and invisible, “to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense.” This hegemony is the ongoing cultural process that gerrymanders the boundaries of perception.

A more nuanced rendition of hegemony shows that subordinates’ social vision is not so hopelessly small at all. What Gramsci calls “contradictory consciousness” allows people both to notice and not to notice these “pressures and limits of simple experience, to stitch together mismatched pieces of contradictory reality and draw the contours of their shared, discussable reality. An example of a good study that starts to reveal this process is John Gaventa’s investigation of an impoverished and polluted Appalachian mining town, *Power and Powerlessness*. Gaventa says that government and the mining company crushed dissent over decades of struggle, and the newspaper ignored or condemned dissent, so that by the late 1970s, all that was left was silence; and poisonous water, and acid-filled mountain streams, and mudslides. After years of political domination, he says, valley dwellers created a culture of political silence, too hopeless even to voice feelings of outrage, too powerless even to formulate their own interests even to themselves. This silence may have sounded just like political acquiescence, but Gaventa says it was not. Valley residents told themselves that they did not care about their ruined home, but their resentment still could be heard in very subtle ways—and the culture of silence collapsed as soon as a plausible opportunity to challenge or avoid the mining company arose.

Still, a study like Gaventa’s does not go far enough in showing how citizens actively create hegemony. His valley dwellers’ silence seems simply to have happened as an automatic, natural, invisible response to the relentless cruelty of their situation. In Gaventa’s story, when a man whose water supply has been poisoned by strip mines declares “Black is beautiful,” referring to coal, he is explicitly declaring himself well served by the companies.
If he says nothing else to reveal his understanding of the situation, the only way we outside observers could feel sure that he was experiencing anything other than simple complacency would be to assert a connection between his attitude and our understanding of the valley’s history. That is, we would have to bypass the meanings the man himself gave to the situation.

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Citizens have to talk themselves into their political ideas together, and that means having everyday places for casual political conversation. Talking ourselves into our feelings and opinions may seem like simple dishonesty or lack of self-awareness. You may be wondering, why can’t we just say what we really feel and think? Because thought itself is dialogue; a conversation that we imagine ourselves to be holding with someone, with ourselves, in which we talk ourselves through our thoughts and feelings.

How do people create “the public,” and give meaning to the act of participating in public life? We make the road by walking it; we create “the public” in practice. Our civic etiquette takes our perceptions of our own power into account, but is not simply caused by an “objective” wider world. Participants constantly “contextualize” any interaction, trying to make sense of it and the wider world, simultaneously. Through this process, civic practices inevitably empower or challenge institutions that the group implicitly holds on its social horizons.

This focus on conversation overcomes the dichotomy between inner and outer, subjective and objective, personal and structural. Instead of focusing on individuals and the inner dispositions they carry with them from one context to another, as studies of beliefs do, I listened in on the spaces between people—on the ways political ideas circulate, coursing through spaces that are neither “subjective” nor “objective,” but “intersubjective,” as Habermas put it. And instead of examining broad institutional hierarchies, as many studies of hegemony do, I tried to understand how people made those power relations relevant for everyday conversations and reality, by systematically sifting certain ideas and ways of talking out of some contexts and into others. If we listen carefully, we can hear just what it is about the wider world that members are taking for granted, instead of assuming that members somehow simply intuit everything about the institutions that an outside observer might notice or might learn through research. And, even more to the point, we can hear just how citizens create their own institutions—the seemingly free institutions of public life.

Political beliefs and political power are embodied in this elusive but very firm sense of what is appropriate to do or say in the contexts of the public sphere. How and why do some contexts evoke political conversation, and others discourage it? Understanding what speakers say in public is an important step in understanding what people assume talk itself is for, in those contexts, and ultimately what they assume public life itself is for and what democratic participation is. We answer the question, “What is democracy?” in practice; scrutinizing our practice might reveal to us that our implicit definition of democracy is not satisfying.

The beauty of the ideal public sphere is that it would allow the widest, most challenging and provocative ideas to circulate throughout the public. I found that ideas circulated in exactly the opposite way from what theorists would hope: the further
backstage the context, the more public-spirited conversation was possible. The same shift kept recurring: the farther the voice from a whisper and the larger the audience, the less eager were speakers to ponder issues of justice and the common good, to present historical or institutional analyses, to criticize institutions, to invite debate; to speak in a publicly minded way. Common sense considered the public sphere to be a place for dramatically airing self-interest and translating self-interest into short-sighted public policies; this folk definition of the public sphere kept most interesting debate out of public circulation.

Simple apathy never explained the political silence I heard. Inside of apathy was a whole underwater world of denials, omissions, evasions; things forgotten, skirted, avoided, and suppressed—a world as varied and colorful as a tropical undersea bed. There is no bottom layer to the cycle of political evaporation; citizens vaguely and ambivalently perceive or experience political issues but do not put them all into words: this is infinite, raw experience, that may in fact never be made recognizable, speakable, cultural. This bottom layer is made of the inevitable, unacknowledged connections we have with each other; dependence on unknown others for water and food, shelter and clothing, language and meaning. The way a person absorbs this level of experience is not observable to the fieldworker or to even the person experiencing it. It is like a dream: it happens, but we cannot grasp it in its entirety except in a theoretical, retrospective reconstruction, motivated by a theory of how the world works. And we all have such theories. One has to learn, for example, to connect or separate even something as basic as contaminated drinking water inward, to one’s own sick body, and outward, to a particular source of pollution. And this urge to connect the dots is powerful; to connect the dots, to make connections even where there are none! Everyone I met was aware, in some way, that they were connected to a wider world, beyond these first “exits” from political life, taken by mythically contented or disconnected or privately neurotic citizens, creating a relationship to the facts, as they ambivalently experience them.

So, the cycle of political evaporation begins on a bed of ambivalence and curiosity; people are not born apolitical. Beyond this fictional apolitical layer, obstacles lie in the path of any group that tries to express publicly minded sentiments in public contexts: groups can amplify the sentiments of anticonnection of the most bigoted, sexist, and homophobic members, and silence any members’ expressions of connection to the world, thus making the group seem more mean-spirited than the sum of the individuals, and evaporating any public expressions of tolerance and openness. Or groups can avoid talking politics in meetings, trying hard not to notice problems that can be addressed only through group discussion, leaving individuals secretly whispering vague worries and questions backstage. Individuals can silence themselves in group meetings, but still be able
to voice coherent political critiques in backstage contexts or in other groups’ meetings. Groups can ignore members who insist on talking politics in meetings, can silence their public-spirited speech in frontstage context.

Finally, any public-spirited idea that struggles through all of these obstacles still has to make its way past official and journalists’ roadblocks before emerging to the sea surface. In this manner, most political debate never makes it to set an agenda, to put one’s explicit demands on the table, to formulate an explicit belief to oneself. Even less debate makes it to the “first dimension of power”—the power to win or lose in an overt power struggle in the public arena. Challenges to the official definitions of citizens’ political participation have dissolved long before that.

While conversation did not make it to the surface, action did. Anyone in town could hear about the extraordinarily good volunteers exhausting themselves for the community (and privately wonder if this was the only possible solution to the problems volunteers addressed). Volunteer-style citizenship is the most temptingly easy, hegemonic format for involvement; it works by defining the floor for citizen participation in particular settings; by setting the boundaries for what citizens can say and how they can say it in the settings of the potential public sphere. People also knew about bigoted joking, because it sometimes translated directly into violence or name-calling, the first dimension of power: the aura of exclusion kept blacks and others out of some of the few “community” gathering places in town; just a few violent acts, and a subtle atmosphere of exclusion, bleed a frightening racist tinge throughout society without ever having to reach public discourse.

The cycle of political evaporation was also a cycle of misconstructions, in which volunteers and recreation group members represented themselves as self-interested and unconcerned, and activists then took them at their word and made dramatic efforts at rousing them from their supposed stupor. “Putting heads together to come up with solutions” was not the image that came to mind when volunteers thought about activism. Disengaged people thought of publicly minded talk as “soapboxing”—standing

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up in a crowd and mindlessly yelling, to capture attention. Volunteers thought that criticism was bad unless people could do something about it. If all social problems are inevitable, then criticism is just theater.

News reporting about activism fitted well with these bystanders’ understanding of activists as people who are, at best, putting themselves on public display because they have a special kind of personality and “believe in standing up for their beliefs”; or because they are self-interested, or because they want attention; and in none of these cases offering any thoughtful, informed explanations for their concerns. The irony was, nobody really liked or admired self-interested speech and everyone detested theatricality. At an informal party after a small demonstration, one participant remarked drily that such events never even made it into the local news at all. To another event, the media came out because it was theatrical. “They asked me whether it would be or not: ‘Is it gonna be dramatic? Theatrical?’ They actually said they wouldn’t come if it wasn’t!” So, even though they disliked theatricality, activists thought that they had to stage dramatic events. Reporters did not like purely theatrical events, but thought the public would be entranced by enjoyable spectacles. The disengaged public read about activists’ stunts with disgust, if at all. In this tragic cycle of political evaporation, public speech was dishonored. The cycle reconfirmed Americans’ belief that public speech is nothing more than glittery self-aggrandizement.

On the other hand, the activists who tried so hard to sound like neutral experts would have appealed to people who appreciated their civic etiquette for its stuffy clauses and stiff vocabulary, for being difficult to understand; they would have heard it and thought that politics is boring and that they themselves were not smart enough to understand politics, instead of thinking that the activists are stupid. Those citizen-experts seemed to display knowledge of official processes and demonstrate that the activists are at least “screaming and yelling at the right people.” Volunteers would have thought that the stiff technical speech sounded authoritative but “distant” and “remote,” not something that could “affect them personally.” This kind of language thus would have reinforced all of these readers’ understandings of politics, as requiring very technical solutions.

Volunteer-style citizenship is temptingly easy.

Commentators, politicians, and theorists on all ends of the U.S. political spectrum applaud civic participation. Nobody ever comes out against it. After offering devastating critiques of the undemocratic nature of many institutions, many books and commentaries end with a general call for civic participation: participation in associations is hailed as the cure for many ills, from slow economic development to a declining sense of community, from the rise of loneliness and excessive competitiveness to inequality and excess corporate power, to ethnic and religious dogmatism, or as a partial cure for most or all of these at once.

I agree with Tocqueville and Walzer that vibrant civic life can infuse all of the rest of life with a fresh spirit, giving people ground on which to stand when presenting arguments against the excesses and narrowness imposed by any of these other spheres of life. But just advocating participation is not enough. The quality of public dialogue within these civic groups matters, too.
So what can help reverse this cycle of political evaporation, bring life to the deserted public sphere, and help Americans learn how to care about politics? Institutions do not all necessarily inspire a cycle of political evaporation: they can inspire the opposite. The national environmentalist organizations that helped a city antitoxics group, and the black Baptist church that hosted one townwide volunteer meeting, for example, implicitly told local citizens that publicly minded messages would not be ignored. By lending their ears, an irreplaceable resource, these national groups helped activists, and even some volunteers, to learn to speak in a new way in public contexts.

Without such counterforces to the institutions that discourage public debate, there were no public places for groups to speak with a publicly minded voice. Little local groups all over the country can try to develop such spaces from scratch; but a group that has access to the ears of a national or international organization that honors publicly minded talk—a religious body, an activist organization, a governmental body, an unusual media outlet—has an easier time, building upon the spaces that are already there, expanding the small breathing spaces into spacious openings. Local groups could make it part of their goal to keep those “ears” healthy, helping foster those broader organizations. The more that groups are able to speak in public, the more citizens will expect publicly minded debate in public contexts, and perhaps accept it as a cultural pattern.

Encouraging political debate is not identical to encouraging citizens to lend a hand. Presidents regularly stage ceremonies to honor volunteers; honoring volunteer work is a start—national service like Vista, that would pay volunteers a subsistence wage, for example, or the Thousand Points of Light Foundation, could help make volunteer work seem as important as it truly is. Yet a problem could easily arise if these volunteers became eager to help people one at a time, but at the cost of blocking out awareness of the possibly overwhelming, systemic aspects of the problems.

Some political theorists and politicians suggest repairing Americans’ bitter aversion to politics with call-in talk shows, or with call-in referenda, but these are not good solutions. Citizens have to learn how to connect their personal lives to political issues. A one-shot call to a radio talk show would likely reaffirm listeners’ belief that political debate is bewildering and disembodied, that ideas come from nowhere, and that people who care about politics just want to hear themselves talk at weird hours of the day and night. Such disembodied citizen participation neglects the process of learning to talk about politics. The theory behind this suggestion is that people are ready-made good citizens, naturally equipped to discuss, debate, understand how their concerns are connected to a wider world. But as interviews show, some citizens have had no practice in connecting their lives to politics; call-in talk shows and easy televised voting would open up a forum to unformed opinions that have not benefited from reflection.
And as the conversations between volunteers show, many citizens already have trimmed their aspirations before voicing them publicly—like impoverished people who, when asked what they would do with a million dollars, can imagine only as far as buying a warm winter coat. In radio call-in shows, callers are usually supposed to present themselves as representatives of “the little people”: powerless, simple, devoted to action and not talk. These shows often address politics with a spirit that is not open to debate; they dehumanize the other side instead of trying to engage in dialogue. These shows’ civic etiquette does not invite callers to debate, but only to become what one talk show host’s fans proudly call themselves: “dittoheads.”

Confessional TV talk shows, on the other hand, seem on the face of it to open up public speech to all, letting new identities and new topics burst into the public realm in a way that is more liberating and introspective than the polemical call-in shows. Some scholars say that talk TV grasps just how the smallest, seemingly quirky issues can really matter to real people, making the unspeakable speakable. Yet these shows open up the public sphere in a way that actually aids the cycle of political evaporation: in such self-confessional shows, citizens bare only the most private, intimate experiences for broadcast—like one participant who described to me, in great detail, her ex-husband’s drug problem and his failed efforts at quitting, and her unhappy childhood and more, but said that disclosing how she voted for president or disclosing her party affiliation was too private. The confessional talk-TV show enforces a relentlessly small circle of concern and outlaws reflection in public on the common good. Volunteers are called upon to lend a hand, therapeutic talk-show participants to bare their hearts; still missing from both styles is a thinking, moral soul that is loyally connected to the wider world. Direct questioning of politicians in so-called “town meetings” on TV could raise the level of political debate among politicians, as one 1992 presidential debate that included citizens’ direct questions showed; and if debate amongst politicians were less silly, and if there were some way of preventing politicians from planting fake citizens in the audience to ask only questions the politicians are prepared to answer, then citizens might be less disgusted, more inclined to talk reasonably with each other. But one-time events will not create ongoing public discussion. Volunteers had good, moral reasons for avoiding political discussion; and it took a long time for activists to unravel their culture of political avoidance and learn to value publicly minded debate. “Deliberative polling” is another intriguing suggestion aimed at rebuilding democracy:

Many citizens claim only to care about their own self-interest.
James Fishkin has advocated gathering about 600 citizens from all over the country and all walks of life, to meet for several days to discuss the issues of the day. The group would represent a perfect cross-section of Americans, showing how we would think if we had had the opportunity to deliberate. The results of their deliberations would, he hopes, be widely reported in the media, possibly replacing the media’s excessive reporting of the “top of the head” responses that people usually give to standard poll questions. The deliberative poll and stories about it might raise the level of media discussion and could certainly help avoid the often destructively mindless use of political surveys in the media, and perhaps do a little bit to germinate a new political culture.

Unlike most groups in the United States, the Christian right is better able than others to bring questions of the common good into public circulation, because religious language is not bereft of public-minded rhetoric, as political language is. When Americans want to talk about the common good it is easier to use religious language. The problem is that the way fundamentalists understand “religion” does not include interpretation, debate, evidence—God already gave all the answers—and there is a tendency to dehumanize those who disagree—“humanists,” gays, Jews, Muslims. Another language that purports to have all the answers without requiring public debate is the language of the free market. According to that approach, money talks, so people do not need to. An irony in the United States is that while “humanists” avoid talking about the common good, fundamentalists and free-market advocates join hands, using the language of a collective good to advocate private schooling, private health care, and private charity instead of welfare, individual punishment instead of social compassion. The task for a modern public is to develop a way of talking about the common good of diverse citizens that remains open to debate. But when public spirit evaporates from everyone else’s public discourse, the only “moral” voice left in public is the voice that calls for citizens to abandon the public good.

What if newspapers opened up spaces for grassroots groups to write columns explaining their positions, called public meetings, reported more actively on grassroots efforts? What if social service workers avoided the temptation to enlist volunteers one at a time to treat each problem one at a time? What if political organizers learned how to listen to their constituents more acutely? Organizers who are interested in making the link between local and global politics often grow discouraged when so many citizens claim only to care about their own self-interest, only about issues “close to home.” Organizers could listen to members talk in more than one context, and could pay attention to how different contexts amplify or muffle publicly minded analyses and concerns. Organizers could recognize that their ears are at least as important as their mouths, that just offering themselves as a public audience is perhaps the most constructive thing they can do, listening to local groups offer political analyses in public, reassuring local groups that it is permissible, and good, to discuss politics in public spaces.

Public speech can become a source of power.
Most important, citizens themselves can cultivate a sense of respect for the power of talk itself. Of course, hands-on relief of suffering is important; but talking about the human causes of suffering is important, too; and the two could go together. Busy volunteer groups might feel that they do not have time to devote to such discussion, but often, talking about it in public-spirited terms would not take any more time at all, and in the long run, that kind of discussion could inspire people, and lead to more thoughtful and effective ways of addressing the problems. Rather than focusing on changing only the private beliefs and “inner” values or the “outer” powers that make participation so difficult, we could devote more care to opening up everyday contexts for publicly minded talk, and valuing those public places.

While the parking-lot-filled, toxin-laden suburban landscape surrounding the groups may seem unusually desolate, it clearly shows how hard it can be to develop a sense of togetherness in the suburban places where most Americans live. And while the polluted physical environment surrounding the groups may seem extraordinary, it clearly shows that citizens’ lack of attention is not simply due to lack of danger or lack of perceived danger. How different are the rest of us from these neighbors of toxic industries, ringed around by military bases exporting weapons to the world, witnessing fires and explosions and watching the nuclear battleships float by? Perhaps we live a few more miles away, but how far? If the chemical plants moved to some country with lower environmental standards, would that be far enough? Perhaps we feel safe. If we do not, we, too, manage our feelings somehow, perhaps by telling each other that the problems are not close to home. In trying to get along, and make the world seem to make sense, we sometimes develop an etiquette for talking about political problems that makes it harder for us to solve them.

The act of carving out public space for open-ended, broad-minded political conversation could, potentially, implicitly call into question many unjust forms of power. When citizens assume that speaking in public is a source of power, public speech magically can become a source of power. But when we assume that public speech is untrustworthy, useless, and dangerous, then we lose a precious, magical gift: the ability to decide what goes on in public—to represent ourselves to ourselves—and to make sense of the world together.

Tracing this process of political evaporation shows how some Americans create the local institutions of the public sphere, tells us what they think the public sphere is, tells us what they assume community and democracy are. Recreation group members gathered because members wanted friendship and community, a
Volunteers and activists gathered to try to make the world better. Yet, all the groups’ sense of political etiquette prevented them from fully following up on their humanitarian impulses for gathering together, preventing their desires—for togetherness, for community improvement, for world improvement—from reaching full bloom. For most of the Americans portrayed here, and probably for most Americans, the public sphere is a dry and dismal place, from which intelligence, curiosity, and generosity have evaporated. Yet, the people I met also ambivalently knew that they were deeply connected to a wider world. Ambivalently, most wanted a wider circle of concern than they let themselves voice in public.

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