

# Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy

Michael Schudson

□—*Inspired by the writings of John Dewey, among others, thinking in communication studies has often taken face-to-face conversation to be the heart of democratic life. But face-to-face conversation has been as much honored in aristocracies as in democracies and there are, in fact, two distinctive and contrasting ideals of conversation—the sociable conversation and the problem-solving conversation. Conversation that serves democracy is distinguished not by egalitarianism but by norm-governedness and public-ness, not by spontaneity but by civility, and not by its priority or superiority to print and broadcast media but by its necessary dependence on them. An argument is offered that institutions and norms of democracy give rise to democratic conversations rather than that the inherent democracy of conversation gives rise to politically democratic norms and institutions.*

**T**HE NOTIONS of “civil society” and “the public sphere” have drawn attention to the character of “talk” as a constitutive feature of democracy. When Jürgen Habermas writes that “a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (1974, p. 79), conversation is granted an exceedingly important political role. If democracy is, as it has often been called, government by discussion, or, more precisely, “government by rational and free public discussion among legally equal citizens,” conversation must lie close to its heart.<sup>1</sup>

This was certainly the view of John Dewey. For him, talk was the central feature of democratic life. The chief requirement for revitalizing public life,

he wrote in 1927, is “the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public” (Dewey, 1927, p. 208). Such high authority notwithstanding, it is this claim that I want to criticize. I do so in a friendly spirit; that is, I am criticizing a notion I myself find very appealing. But I also think it has been misleading, perhaps dangerously so.

## The Place of Conversation in Democracy

One does not have to search far today to find views that place conversation at the center of democratic life. Literary critic David Simpson (1997) even speaks of a “cult of ‘conversation’” today. There is a veritable obsession with the term. It can be found all over the academic landscape—in post-modernist philosophy, in communitarian social criticism, in the public jour-

---

*Michael Schudson is professor of communication and of sociology at the University of California, San Diego.*

nalism movement, and elsewhere. It is to be found in liberal critics of the mass media and in philosophers of discursive democracy. It is central to Richard Rorty's critique of scientific and philosophical certainty. What we can "know," for Rorty, is only what we can come to in on-going conversation with others rather than in an encounter with a nature beyond human interaction. Rorty, Michael Oakeshott, and Hans-Georg Gadamer all turn to "conversation" as a model of knowing. We are seeing, Simpson has observed, "the appearance of the conversational ideal in postmodern culture" (1995, p. 47).

In communication studies, James Carey has been especially eloquent in placing conversation at the center of public life and the restoration of a public at the heart of the contemporary task of democratic society. The public, he writes, is "a group of strangers that gathers to discuss the news" (1995, p. 381). It is "a society of conversationalists or disputants, dependent upon printing for the dissemination of their ideas" (1995, p. 381). This was the grand ideal of the public—and it existed in reality, in Carey's view, much as it does in Habermas. This "conversational public," as Carey puts it, was "a public of discussion and disputation independent of both the press and the State" and it "has pretty much been eviscerated in our time" (1995, p. 383). In the twentieth century, as journalism became more "objective" according to its professional lights, the relationship of press and public disintegrated. "The press no longer facilitated or animated a public conversation for public conversation had disappeared" (1995, p. 389). The press was no longer the background to the central task of conversation; any remaining conversation "was orchestrated by the press in the name

of a superior knowledge and superior instruments of inquiry into just what was going on" (1995, p. 389). For Carey, independent journalism, made all the worse by television, helped destroy political parties while opinion polling helped obscure genuine public opinion. The public arena shrank, and citizens had little choice but to be "consumers of politics or escapist from it" (1995, p. 391). See also Carey (1987).

But what is—or what was or what might be—this ideal conversation at the very soul of democratic life? Are we to imagine it as a form of social life spontaneous and free? This would seem to be an important part of what makes conversation central. But it would be wrong to assume that the spontaneous is the authentic or true. An emphasis on the spontaneous draws attention away from the contrivances necessary for democracy—indeed, it draws attention away from the fact that democracy is a contrivance. I will argue that democratic talk is not essentially spontaneous but essentially rule-governed, essentially *civil*, and unlike the kinds of conversation often held in highest esteem for their freedom and their wit, it is essentially oriented to *problem-solving*.

Are we to suppose that conversation is egalitarian? This is not necessarily so. An individual must have "cultural capital" to participate effectively in conversation. One might even argue that the actual relationship of talk and equality is not one of affinity but of paradox. The more that talk is among true equals, the more it fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all, lapses even into silence. The presumption of equality in conversation draws attention away from the fundamental problem of membership in democracy, of insid-

ers and outsiders, and so precludes attention to the rules that make democracy possible for a pluralistic rather than a homogeneous population. What distinguishes democratic conversation, I want to suggest, is not equality but publicness. Democratic talk is not necessarily egalitarian but it is essentially *public*, and if this means that democratic talk is talk among people of different values and different backgrounds, it is also profoundly *uncomfortable*.

Ideas about conversation in the Western tradition can be traced back at least to Cicero, who wrote that private conversation should be easy-going, free of passions, free of gossip about people not present, and that it should include everyone and allow everyone a turn. Following Cicero, early modern Italian, French, and British advice literature on conversation stressed the cooperative and egalitarian features of ideal conversation. Interruption, as French manuals of the seventeenth century reiterated, was wrong; so too was monopolizing the conversation. At the same time, spontaneity was urged, even if, ironically, it had to be premeditated. One authority recommended "hesitation and even an occasional clumsiness in order to preserve the illusion of spontaneity."<sup>2</sup>

Still, the egalitarian advice was within a context. There was also advice on the ways to speak to one's superiors and inferiors, and it did not have to be said at all that some people were outside the conversation. Spontaneity was encouraged—yes, but there was also advice on how to produce it. Cooperation—yes, but the early manuals also recognized the competitiveness in conversation and the desire to shine. Historian Peter Burke (1995) concludes that "a truly general theory of conversation should discuss the tension and the bal-

ance between the competitive and cooperative principles, between equality and hierarchy, between inclusion and exclusion, and between spontaneity and study, rather than placing all the weight on the first item in each of these pairs." (p. 92)

Recognizing a tension between principles in conversation is one way to arrive at a more coherent and realistic view of conversation. I propose, alternatively, that two rather different ideals of conversation are intertwined and confused. One ideal could be termed the sociable model of conversation, the other the problem-solving model. The distinguishing feature of the sociable ideal is its insistence that conversation be non-utilitarian. In a conversation, as political philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote, the aim is not inquiry, there is no hankering after a conclusion. Neither informing nor persuading are crucial. Reasoning "is not sovereign" and conversation "does not compose an argument." Conversation has no end outside itself. It is "an unrehearsed intellectual adventure" and—"as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering"<sup>8</sup> (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 198; see also Shapin, 1994, pp 114–121).<sup>3</sup>

What is perhaps the most resonant part of Oakeshott's discussion of conversation is his notion that what human beings of a given age inherit in human civilization is not science or technology or an accumulating body of knowledge but "a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. . . . It is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the

world, or to contrive a better world, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian" (p. 198). In this model, then, conversation is oriented to the pleasure of interacting with others in conversation itself; it is therefore contemporaneously social. But, further, as part of an ongoing conversation over time, taking its materials from a long-term human tradition, it is also historically social.

In contrast, the problem-solving understanding of conversation finds the justification of talk in its practical relationship to the articulation of common ends. Popular voting, majority rule, and other indices of democracy are vouched for, John Dewey wrote, by the fact that "they involve a consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles" (1927, p. 206). The central problem for modern democracies to face is "the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public." (p. 208) For Dewey, democracy could not exist without participation, and conversation was the hallmark of the participatory. "The connections of the ear with vital and outgoing thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator." (p. 219)<sup>4</sup>.

For Carey, similarly, although one senses in his writing an attraction to the pure pleasure of talk, the emphasis is on conversation as the workplace in which democracy happens if it happens at all. Conversation, for Carey, is dispute around the news, a discussion of the issues of the day. It is the back-and-forth out of which a democratic public realizes itself. Carey is in some respects critical of Dewey, particularly

his failure to think through questions of power present in talk, and Carey's distrust of experts in democracy does not come to terms with Dewey's faith in science as the fundamental knowledge-base for democratic life. But, on the whole, Carey's voice in communication studies has been one championing the relevance of Dewey's vision for contemporary society. See Carey (1989, pp. 69–88).

Both the sociable and problem-solving models of conversation emphasize the equality of conversational partners. Inside the conversation, equality, civility, and fairness reign. But the barriers to entry differ. The sociable model emphasizes cultivation and sensibility; conversational partners should develop subtle capacities for fresh, entertaining, and responsive talk. The problem-solving model, in contrast, focuses on argument, the conversational partners' capacity to formulate and respond to declarative views of what the world is and what it should be like. The sociable model sees conversation as an end-in-itself, an aesthetic pleasure. The problem-solving model sees conversation as a means to the end of good government. More strongly, it pictures conversation itself as a model of good government. The skill or capacity of a competent participant in sociable conversation is verbal facility, wit, and sociability itself. The capacity of the participant in problem-solving conversation is reasonableness—as political theorist William Galston puts it, it is both "the willingness to listen seriously to a range of views" and "the willingness to set forth one's own views intelligibly and candidly as the basis of a politics of persuasion" (1991, p. 227).

The recuperative and interactive nature of conversation makes it particularly apt as a model both of sociability

on the one hand and of public reasoning on the other. So does its essentially cooperative character. Even in an argument, there is mutual support—if only in the agreement to stay engaged, to keep focused on the other person, and to not abandon the talk for either sticks and stones, on the one hand, or “the silent treatment” on the other. Even in a hostile exchange, philosopher Paul Grice’s (1975/1989) “Cooperative Principle” is often satisfied, that participants speak according to “the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange” in which they are engaged.

In the sociable conversation, talk’s interactive engagement provides the quality of a rich game—say, chess—with plenty of constraints on moves, but with little predictability of outcome. Likewise, the communicative virtue of problem-solving conversation is not the speaking or the listening or even their close proximity. It is the interaction of the participants and the ongoing capacity for each statement to be revised in accord with the prompts or responses of the other.

This, in turn, depends on a degree of good will. An argument out of control is a conversation where each statement’s ambiguity is read in the most hostile way possible. If the husband and wife are fighting, and one says, “I can’t take this any more, I’m going out,” the other may reply, “So you don’t love me any more? You want a divorce? You’re leaving me?” It might have been just as logical to respond, “Okay, maybe we both need to cool off for awhile.” Just because people are in a conversation, there is no guarantee that they will take advantage of conversation’s recuperative powers. Not the fact of conversation but the norms that govern it make it serviceable for democratic self-government.

There is many a slip twixt conversation and democratic government. Because that is so, the ground rules of conversation are more important than the spontaneity that may arise therein. Conversation can be and, without appropriate training, education, and social equality, normally is, highly inegalitarian. The rules of democratic conversation can help protect the slow of speech, who are otherwise disenfranchised by the articulate and by the glib.

Speaking at, say, a town meeting, is an extremely difficult task, one that causes many people enough fright that they simply don’t go. As one farmer in Vermont told political scientist Jane Mansbridge, (1980, pp. 60–64) “. . . it does take a little bit of courage. ‘Specially if you get up and make a booboo. I mean you make a mistake and say something, then people would never get up and say anything again. They feel themselves inferior.’” Florence Johnson, a house cleaner and mother of five, had never attended the town meeting when Mansbridge spoke to her. “If you go there and you speak up, they make fun of you for speaking up and so on, and I guess people just don’t want to go and be made fun of.” Others felt they would speak at town meeting, but only if they got mad. A retired businessman said, “Some people are eloquent and can make others feel inferior. They can shut them down. I wouldn’t say a word at town meetings unless they got me madder’n hell.”

Again and again, Mansbridge found great tension arising in the town meeting or, for some citizens, in the very prospect of it. Farmer Jamie Pedley got a splitting headache; an older man feared for his heart. Over and over, townspeople reported that people don’t speak up at town meeting because of

fear of criticism or fear of ridicule. Even for those who overcome their fears and attend town meetings, a willingness to speak up was very unevenly distributed. The distribution reproduced and even accentuated social inequalities. For instance, 49 percent of those who attended the three meetings Mansbridge focused on were women, but only 29 percent of people who spoke at those meetings, and most of those merely gave reports or asked questions. Women provided only 8 percent of what Mansbridge classified as "major statements of opinions." They initiated none of the ten "controversial exchanges."

The fear of embarrassment the Vermonters express is a fundamental human characteristic. Charles Darwin argued that every human expression of emotion except one has an analogue in other species. The distinctively human manifestation of emotion is blushing; Darwin explains that it is "the thinking what others think of us, which excites a blush." We blush, in a word, because we are embarrassed. For sociologist Erving Goffman (1981), the effort to avoid embarrassments provides the central and continuous drama to human social life. It is no accident that the situations Goffman regularly analyzed are public ones. There are situations where the possibility of embarrassment is minimized, particularly where people feel completely at home or where religious or political fervor or the passion of love make people practically asocial, that is, relatively insensitive to the opinions of mere acquaintances or strangers. But in public meetings, streetcorner conversations, and other interaction with acquaintances in public, the presentation of self and the embarrassment risked by it come to the fore (see Schudson, 1984).

We should perhaps distinguish two kinds of conversations in democracies, both of them necessary, but in radically different ways, to the functioning of democratic society. In homogeneous conversation, people talk primarily with others who share their values and they expect that conversation will reinforce them in the views they already share. In these conversations, people may test their opinions, to be sure, and venture ideas that may not be warmly received, but they do so in full knowledge that they agree on fundamentals and that the assumptions that they share will make such experimentation safe. People may be prepared in these familial conversations for citizenship in the more daunting form of heterogeneous conversation. Here, in what we might term "truly public" conversation, citizens talk with other citizens who may not share their views and values. In these conversations, friendly testing is all but impossible; in these settings, there are penalties for expressing uncertainty and doubt, rewards for speaking with conviction and certainty. Tempers may flare and working partnerships may be frayed or severed. But there may also be the exhilaration of achieving agreement (or, for one side or another, of extracting concessions) and in the face of the hurdle of heterogeneity getting the public business done.<sup>5</sup>

It is especially in the truly public conversation that norms of reasonableness are most often invoked. Stephen Macedo (1990), for instance, argues that opinion in a democracy is obliged to have "a certain form and quality of reasoning" if it is to have public force. At a minimum, "citizens must have public reasons and arguments to support their political actions. These public reasons should be further disci-

plined by contact with the reasonable and defensible aspects of our constitution and legal tradition" (p. 103). Macedo is intent to show that liberalism is compatible with a relatively strong notion of citizenship, that is, one that asserts certain virtues or practices as a requirement of citizenship. "Citizens should participate in the spirit of public justification: not simply asserting their own positions, but considering and addressing the reasonable arguments of others, including those of public officials." Liberalism, as Macedo puts it, stands not only for toleration, law-governed liberty, and a notion of justice centered on rights but also "reasoned self-government." The latter insists that we treat one another reasonably and meet objections "with reasons"—it is an "aspiration to public reasonableness" (p. 40).

Macedo's view is distinguishable from both the sociable and problem-solving models of conversation I have outlined. Unlike the sociable view, it is almost ponderously solemn, earnestly envisioning a conversation oriented to the highest common ends and operating by the most rigorous norms of public morality. Aesthetics, play, and wit do not enter in. At the same time, this view is distinguishable from any model that places great emphasis on the spontaneity of conversation. Macedo's imagined conversation is not spontaneous, voluble, ever-flowing. It is hard-won. Its virtues lie as much in the preparation for conversation as in anything that might spontaneously arise within it or, certainly, anything that might be consummated within discussion itself.

This is also true in legal theorist Bruce Ackerman. Ackerman holds that "dialogue" is "the first obligation of citizenship" (1989, p. 6). Ackerman im-

plies, correctly in my view, that liberalism is not founded on a "liberal subject," that is, a rational autonomous individual committed to scientific rationality and hence implicated in white male middle class morality. Liberalism is the system designed to accommodate socially constituted persons, indeed, persons who in a sense socially construct themselves, people who take on different roles, who are different "subjects" and different selves in different situations. In public political settings, these persons leave behind or actively repress certain parts of themselves. They do not fit liberalism because they are constructed to fit it; they fit it because they are committed to making it work.

The norms of reasonable like those Macedo envisions are not incorporated into just any conversation. Think of Grice's rules for conversation that Habermas adopts in his pragmatics of conversation. These are rules of cooperation rather than rules of reasonableness. They require less a logical relatedness in talk than a degree of social engagement, a willingness—for the time being—to subordinate any personal agenda to the continuation of the talk itself as the going concern. Talk, as Erving Goffman writes, "is an example of that arrangement by which individuals come together and sustain matters having a ratified, joint, current, and running claim upon attention, a claim which lodges them together in some sort of intersubjective, mental world" (1981, pp. 70–71). That is conversation defined in a very encompassing fashion, but it does not specify conditions sufficient for the conversation that democratic theorists endorse.

Many successfully cooperative conversations fall short of a democratic ideal. Harold Pinter in a short play

entitled "A Slight Ache" reports on a breakfast table conversation between Flora and Edward. Edward, as we might expect, is reading the paper as the scene opens, but Flora manages to engage him in conversation:

Flora: Have you noticed the honeysuckle this morning?

Edward: The what?

Flora: The honeysuckle.

Edward: Honeysuckle? Where?

Flora: By the back gate, Edward.

Edward: Is that honeysuckle? I thought it was . . . convolvulus, or something.

Flora: But you know it's honeysuckle.

Edward: I tell you I thought it was convolvulus.

(Pause.)

Flora: It's in wonderful flower.

Edward: I must look.

Flora: The whole garden's in flower this morning. The clematis. The convolvulus. Everything. I was out at seven. I stood by the pool.

Edward: Did you say—that the convolvulus was in flower?

Flora: Yes.

Edward: But good God, you just denied there was any.

Flora: I was talking about the honeysuckle.

Edward: About the what?

Flora: (calmly) Edward—you know that shrub outside the toolshed. . .

Edward: Yes, yes.

Flora: That's convolvulus.

Edward: That?

Flora: Yes.

Edward: Oh. (Pause) I thought it was japonica.

Flora: Oh, good Lord no.

Edward: Pass the teapot, please.<sup>6</sup>

Funny as this is, it has all the standard issue features of conversation. It has

mutual engagement. It is an even-handed, egalitarian, turn-taking exchange. It has the give-and-take that enable repair or recuperation to take place. It has the power of transmitting information and clarifying the common world. But it does not have public reasonableness.

Public reasonableness is required where personal composure is put at risk. Of course, conversation is important in comfortable settings where we can come to know what we believe by "thinking out loud." But it is also important in uncomfortable settings where we risk embarrassment if we do not know or cannot articulate what we believe. Indeed, uncomfortable settings predominate in the institutions of public discussion. Democracy is deeply uncomfortable. It is precisely in public democratic settings where the squirmingly anxious Goffmanesque world takes hold.

## The Subject of Conversation

Now, what is the subject of problem-solving public conversation in a democracy? The substance of conversation is taken to be nearly irrelevant in the sociable model—except that it should never be about matters serious enough to disrupt sociability. The problem-solving model is more ambitious—and more conflicted. It insists on a degree of sociability or, at least, civility but also on the capacity of the conversation to translate the sociable into the public. This also translates the public into the sociable. Democratic conversation is in part dependent on, parasitic on, the prior existence of a public world—often available in print. This reinforces the view expressed a century ago by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde that books and newspapers provide the nearly universal substance



of private conversations. Not that everyone need read the newspapers but even those who fail to “are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts. One pen suffices to set off a million tongues” (1898/1969, p.304). Before print, Tarde suggests, conversations varied greatly from one place to another and had in common only their monotony. But with books and, especially, the press, conversations become “uniform in space and diversified in time. Every morning the papers give their publics the conversations for the day. One can be almost certain at any moment of the subject of conversation between men talking at a club, in a smoking room, in a lobby” (1898/1969, p. 312). The newspaper, Tarde adds, “began as only a prolonged echo of chats and correspondences and ended up as their almost exclusive source” (pp. 317–318). Democratic talk centers on public matters. This also means, I believe, that what democratic conversations are *about* comes from public sources. The newspaper is the historically central source of democratic conversation—the newspaper, the laws, the public world.

Much thinking about the mass media today assumes that face-to-face conversation is a superior form of human interaction for which mass communication is a forever flawed substitute. As John Dewey wrote in 1927, “the winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech.” Dewey acknowledged that print was necessary, a “precondition of the creation of a true public.” Even so, “it and its results are but tools after all. Their final actuality is accomplished in face-to-face relationships by means of direct give and take” (p. 218).

This tries to save the superiority of

conversation over mass communication, but I do not think it succeeds. Democratic talk, after all, is often just the reverse of what Dewey (and Carey after him) suggests: face-to-face conversation leads up to something written rather than print culminating in something conversational. The consummation of democratic talk may be a signed petition, a posted notice, a written law, a written judicial opinion, a written executive order. Democracies put great store in the power of writing to secure, verify, and make public. Democracies require public memories; writing greatly enhances the capacity of public memory. So talk in democracy is civil, public, and oriented to the explicit, available, transferable communications found in print and broadcasting rather than face-to-face conversation.

Conversation at large is the DNA or germ plasm of social life. It has the capacity to replicate, to combine, to exceed itself. It is inherently neither public nor private but social. It exists not only in democracies. Conversation in democracy may differ from conversation elsewhere not because democracy bubbles up from conversation but because democratic political norms and institutions instruct and shape conversations to begin with. Nothing in conversation itself necessarily suggests democracy, not even its formal egalitarianism; in early modern Europe, it suggested, if anything, aristocracy because it depended on cultivation.

It may be that democracy sets up norms that affect even familial or homogeneous conversations in democracy. Citizenship seeps from the common political forum into private settings. Where this happens, in the family, for instance, it becomes difficult for the parent to answer the child’s “Why should I?” with “Because I said so.”

The norm of reason-giving competes with the assumption of parental authority. Democracy creates democratic conversation more than conversation naturally creates democracy. As philosopher George Kateb has suggested, democracy cultivates a certain kind of self, subtly, incompletely, but effectively nonetheless. The "mere status of citizen," he writes, which makes a person eligible to run for office or to vote, "is a continuous incitement to claim the status of citizen . . . in all nonpolitical relations of life. Indeed, the incitement is to politicize the nonpolitical relations of life and thus to democratize them" (Kateb, 1992, p. 40).

Democratic conversation presumes no so much equality and spontaneity as a normative order that insists on equality and a social order that insists on a certain level of public-ness in talk. That is, democratic conversation is conversation not among intimates nor among strangers but among citizens who are acquainted by virtue of their citizenship. Strangers will miscommunicate because they do not share background knowledge and commitment to common norms; intimates will communicate without speaking, without stating their premises, without raising potential conflicts and embarrassments. Democratic conversation, in contrast to both, is a facility of public communication under norms of public reasonableness, not simply a facility of social interaction.

Sociable talk takes place among social equals, not necessarily intimates, in clubs and coffee houses. Where democratic conversation takes place is more difficult to pin down. It may take place in discussion of values among intimates in a family. But the fully public democratic conversation takes place,

as I have suggested, in settings where talk is bound to be uncomfortable. This is a kind of talk people are particularly loathe to engage in—it invites conflict, and whether it is in small-town Vermont or elsewhere, people prefer sociable conversation to potentially explosive conversation.<sup>7</sup> Such talk is threatening enough to require formal or informal rules of engagement. Look, for instance, at the rules established for talk at the Constitutional convention, the "Ur-conversation" of the United States.

On Friday, May 25, 1787, the Constitutional convention met for the first time. Its opening business was promptly taken care of—George Washington was selected President of the convention, and a committee was appointed to prepare rules of procedure. The committee's proposed rules included that when one member of the meeting held the floor, other members should not talk with one another "or read a book, pamphlet or paper, printed or manuscript." No one could speak more than twice on the same question without special permission and could speak the second time only if all others who wanted to speak had had a chance to do so. These rules of equal respect and equal opportunity for participation were supplemented with rules to encourage deliberate consideration of issues, rules for public reasonableness. A complicated question could be divided at the request of any member. Any state could have a vote postponed until the next day even if debate was concluded. Any written document to be considered was to be read through once for information and then debated by paragraphs. Rules of civility were also proposed. Any member could be called to order by any

other member and would then “be allowed to explain his conduct or expressions, supposed to be reprehensible.” The President would decide questions of order without appeal or debate.

All the committee’s proposed rules met with general approval—but one: there was objection to the proposal that any member could call for yeas and nays and have them entered into the minutes. The acts of the Convention did not bind the delegates’ constituents in any way, Rufus King of Massachusetts reminded the Convention, and so it was unnecessary to show the votes to them. George Mason added that keeping a written record of the votes would prejudice members against changing their votes even when their convictions changed. An astute social psychologist, Mason suggested that recording votes would force people toward self-consistency even when reason led them to change their minds. Besides, Mason added, the record would then be a weapon in the hands of adversaries of the results of the Convention. These objections won the day.

All of this suggests, I think, that what makes conversation democratic is not free, equal, and spontaneous expression but equal access to the floor, equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplifications, and widely apportioned speaking rights. The primal American political conversation was carefully structured so that—within the eighteenth century limits of who counted as a citizen—it could be genuinely deliberative and genuinely democratic. It thus had to be anything but spontaneous.

## Conclusion: Conversation in Democracy

Conversation provides no magic solution to problems of democracy. Democracy has little to do with intimacy and little to do with community. It can be thrilling, it can be boring, it can provoke anxiety, it is often uncomfortable. I rarely enjoy the deliberative discourse of publics assembled in relatively large numbers to make decisions. I prefer two-person conversations to large gatherings. I prefer seminars to large assemblies. The larger the group, the more I want rules of engagement because I am slow of speech. This is part of what the romance-of-conversation fails to understand.

There is another thing I would add, as a coda, that the romance of conversation fails to grasp. Democracy sometimes requires withdrawal from conversation, withdrawal from common public subjects. Democracy, as Stephen Holmes suggests (1995, pp. 202–235), may insist that even talk itself be constrained.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, the dangers of disunion and dismemberment of state and civil society by religious passions led to the First Amendment and now a 200-year history of a specific Constitutional effort to keep religion out of political discussion. Democracy may, in a sense, choose to gag its political deliberations, removing them to civil society or the private sphere. Democracies may even choose to gag directly political speech in the interests of fair-minded deliberation. The most familiar instance of this, practiced throughout the United States, is a prohibition on political speech within a certain specified distance of polling places on election day. Here speech is

treated as action, as a form of intimidation or unfair advantage. Legislators around the country have concluded that a moat of political silence should surround the castle of the polling place. In voters' last steps toward the voting booth, collective rights of political expression are sacrificed to individual rights of personal deliberation.

Third, democracy may require withdrawal from civility itself. Democracy may sometimes require that your interlocutor does not wait politely for you to finish but shakes you by the collar and cries "Listen! Listen for God's sake!" We call these situations social movements, strikes, demonstrations.

We call the people who initiate such departures from civility driven, ambitious, unreasonable, self-serving, rude, hot-headed, self-absorbed—the likes of Newt Gingrich and Martin Luther King and William Lloyd Garrison. All of these are people willing to engage in democratic conversation but also pugnacious beyond the point of civility, even willing to make their case to opt out of conversation altogether, at least temporarily and strategically. Any full-bodied concept of democracy and the place of conversation in it would have to take account of the instances where conversation is itself an impediment to democracy's fulfillment.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The definition is adapted from A. D. Lindsay in Holmes, 1995, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Burke (1995, p. 106), citing a manual of 1672 by Charles Sorel.

<sup>3</sup>Gabriel Tarde, too, stresses that conversation is non-utilitarian. He defines it as "any dialogue without direct and immediate utility, in which one talks primarily to talk, for pleasure, as a game, out of politeness" (Tarde, 1898/1969, p. 308). This excerpt comes from Tarde, *L'opinion et la foule* (Paris, Alcan, 1922, pp. 62–158) but was first published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1898. See the editor's note in Tarde, 1989/1969, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup>Oakeshott presumably had no use for experts: there is no notion that "expertise" is required for participation in conversation; cultivation is, and that is quite different. But if Oakeshott is no defender of expertise, Dewey (1927, p. 206) is quite directly a critic: "It is impossible for high-brows to secure a monopoly of such knowledge as must be used for the regulation of common affairs. In the degree to which they become a specialized class, they are shut off from knowledge of the needs which they are supposed to serve."

<sup>5</sup>I have developed this distinction from suggestions made to me by Elihu Katz.

<sup>6</sup>I used this quotation some years ago in an earlier and very different effort to understand the role of conversation in thinking about the mass media and, secondarily in that effort, democracy. See Schudson, 1978, pp. 320–329.

<sup>7</sup>Political talk in public settings may even be derided, as it was early in this century, for taking place in the boisterous territory of the street rather than the civil setting of the home. A New Jersey newspaper praised the "silent, thinking men . . . who go quietly day after day about their business of earning a livelihood and who at night are found in their homes instead of talking politics on street corners." *Trenton True American*, November 6, 1911, cited in Reynolds, 1988, p. 120.

## References

- Ackerman B. (1989). Why dialogue? *Journal of Philosophy*, 86, 5–22.
- Burke, P. (1995). *The art of conversation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Carey, J. (1987, March/April). The press and public discourse. *The Center Magazine*, 4–16.
- Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

- Carey, J. (1995). The press, public opinion, and public discourse. In T. Glasser & C. Salmon (Eds.), *Public opinion and the communication of consent* (pp. 373–402). New York: Guilford.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Galston, W. (1991). *Liberal purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Grice, P. (1989). Logic and conversation (1975). In P. Grice, *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Habermas, J. (1974). The public sphere. *New German Critique*, 1, 49–55.
- Holmes, S. (1995). *Passions and constraint*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Kateb, G. (1992). *The inner ocean*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Mansbridge, J. (1980). *Beyond adversary democracy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Oakeshott, M. (1962). The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind. In M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics*. New York: Basic Books.
- Reynolds, J. (1988). *Testing democracy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Pinter, H. (1962). A slight ache. *Three plays*. New York: Grove.
- Schudson, M. (1984). Embarrassment and Erving Goffman's idea of human nature. *Theory and Society*, 13, 633–648.
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A Social History of Truth*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Simpson, D. (1995). *The academic postmodern and the role of literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Simpson, D. (1997). The cult of "conversation." *Raritan*, 16, 75–85.
- Tarde, G. (1898/1969). *On communication and social influence* (T. Clark, Ed. & Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago.

