Democratic speech in divided times: an introduction

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1470594X231179666

Publisher: Sage

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Democratic speech in divided times: An introduction

Maxime Lepoutre (iD)

University of Reading (Politics and International Relations), Berkshire, UK

Abstract

This is the introduction to the symposium on Maxime Lepoutre, *Democratic Speech in Divided Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). The symposium contains articles by Paul Billingham, Rachel Fraser, and Michael Hannon, and a response by the author.

Precis

In an ideal democracy, people from different walks of life would come together to speak reasonably and respectfully with one another. But this influential picture of open and inclusive speech seems hopelessly idealistic. In contemporary democracies, which are marked by deep social divisions, members of different groups generally avoid talking to one another. And when they *do* talk, their speech often seems to be little more than a vehicle for rage, hatred, and deception. Faced with this dark reality, pessimists might be tempted to abandon the democratic ideal of inclusive and open speech on the grounds that it is too far removed from the real world to be of much use.

Democratic Speech in Divided Times argues that this pessimistic response is a mistake. The appropriate response to deep social divisions is not to jettison the

Corresponding author:
Maxime Lepoutre, University of Reading (Politics and International Relations), Edith Morley Building, Shinfield Road, Reading RG6 6EL, Berkshire, UK.
Email: m.c.lepoutre@reading.ac.uk

democratic ideal of inclusive public discourse, but rather to adjust it, so as to make it more relevant to settings marked by these divisions. This is the project that the book undertakes: it aims to offer a model of democratic speech that is both normatively attractive and realistic in our divided times—and thus, to show that we can successfully navigate between idealism and pessimism about democratic public discourse.

Part I of *Democratic Speech in Divided Times* develops an integrated account of the norms that should govern public discourse in deeply divided settings. Chapter 1 focuses on the influential 'shared reasons' constraint, according to which deliberators must appeal to considerations that are suitably shared when offering justifications. Although this norm plays an important role in facilitating the contestation of power, applying it in divided contexts risks excluding too many considerations from public debate. The chapter argues that offsetting this exclusiveness requires not just confining the shared reasons constraint to the most formal arenas of public discussion, but also, and perhaps more importantly, making ample space for emotionally charged and nonargumentative forms of speech in public discourse. Emotionally charged narrative, in particular, has the capacity to enrich the pool of shared resources from which the shared reasons constraint proceeds, thereby mitigating its exclusionary implications.

Chapter 2 builds on this defense of emotionally charged narrative by examining an emotion that is symptomatic of deep division: anger. This chapter contends, against those who reject public anger as counterproductive, that public expressions of anger have a critically important epistemic role to play in divided contexts. In virtue of anger's distinctive phenomenology, conveying anger to one's listeners can play an indispensable role in alerting them to previously overlooked injustices, and in enhancing their understanding of these injustices. This epistemic function is vital in divided societies: because such societies typically involve significant social segregation and epistemically detrimental ideologies, the injustices endured by some groups are often invisible to, or misunderstood by, other groups.

Put together, Chapters 1 and 2 suggest that some forms of public speech that are symptomatic of divided settings—in particular, speech that is charged with intense and often negative emotions—can nevertheless perform an important democratic function. But other forms of real-world public speech—most notably, hate speech and misinformation—more clearly endanger democratic life. The rest of Part I examines how we should counter such dangerous speech, focusing first on hate speech (Chapter 3) and then on misinformation (Chapter 4).

Democrats are often wary, with good reason, of directly restricting these forms of dangerous speech. An alternative remedy, therefore, might be to counter them with 'more speech' (or 'counterspeech'). Yet critics of counterspeech have argued that this proposed remedy is both unfair and ineffective. Chapters 3 and 4 argue that this skepticism depends on an overly limited understanding of counterspeech, which overlooks (1) the role that the state can play in endowing counterspeech with authority, (2) the distinction between 'negative' counterspeech (which focuses on rejecting incorrect perspectives) and 'positive' counterspeech (which instead affirms a countervailing perspective), and (3) the fact that counterspeech can be a diachronic process, which preempts as well as follows harmful speech. The book thus argues that a more sophisticated conception of counterspeech, which incorporates these insights, can be an appropriate response to

hate speech and misinformation. And while this more sophisticated counterspeech remains an imperfect remedy for harmful speech, the limitations it faces typically also afflict alternative remedies (such as legal restrictions on speech).

Part II of *Democratic Speech in Divided Times* assesses whether the normative framework developed in the first part of the book is excessively idealistic—that is, whether it presupposes background social conditions that are too far removed from those that obtain in contemporary divided democracies.

One potential problem is that *mutual dislike* (or 'affective polarisation') between social groups makes the kind of public discourse recommended in Part I impossible. Chapter 5 responds, firstly, that, in a discursive system, productive public discourse demands far less mutual goodwill than one might think; and, secondly, that even when levels of mutual dislike *are* too high for people productively to engage with one another, 'nonideal' forms of public discourse (including public expressions of anger) can help regenerate mutual goodwill.

Another discursive problem stems from *political ignorance*: it is often said that ordinary people know too little about politics to engage competently in public debate and that, because of the influence of group identity on political beliefs (or 'group cognition'), this problematic ignorance is here to stay. Chapter 6 suggests that this influential worry fails, because it misunderstands the epistemic function of social group identities. The experiences involved in social group membership are epistemically useful for deciding whose political judgment and what political information to trust, *even* when it comes to politically relevant scientific questions, and *even* when people are dogmatically committed to their group perspectives. So, group cognition constitutes a useful tool for managing and overcoming political ignorance—and, by extension, for defusing the threat it raises for public discourse.

Yet the epistemic function of group cognition and the possibility of using speech to combat intergroup animosity both depend, the book acknowledges, on people actually talking to one another. This is a problem given the extensive *social and spatial fragmentation* that impedes intergroup discourse. To address this problem, Chapter 7 recommends adopting 'integrative' policies aimed at desegregating social and political groups, and defends these policies against the charge that they conflict with freedom of association.

If the ideal of inclusive public discourse depends on first implementing robust integrative policies, then isn't this ideal too distant from where we are now? Wouldn't we be better off pursuing a more 'minimalistic' political ideal, which jettisons diverse and large-scale public discourse, after all? The book's final chapter rebuts this last worry. Even if fragmentation, and the ignorance and antipathy that it sustains, are problematic for the ideal of inclusive public discourse, they are just as problematic for the minimalistic political ideals that are touted as alternatives. We gain nothing, therefore, by abandoning the ideal of inclusive public discourse in response to these difficulties. Given that these difficulties are ubiquitous, we have no better option than to make inclusive public discourse work.

Declaration of conflicting interests

ORCID iD

Maxime Lepoutre https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7573-8585

Author biography

Maxime Lepoutre is a Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Reading. His research focuses primarily on the norms that should govern democratic public discourse in divided settings.