**Critical Exchange**

**The Nature of Silence and its Democratic Possibilities[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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In 2003 this journal published a groundbreaking article entitled “Silence: A Politics”. The author, Kennan Ferguson, wrote against the traditional understanding of silence as “inimical to politics”. It was time, he claimed, to consider the full-breadth of possibilities of political agency that lay in silence, for the politics of silence was irreducible to domination and the possibilities of resistance it engenders: i.e., to silencing (denial of agency) and silent resistance (reactive agency). Silence could also be positively constitutive of selves, individual and collective.

The challenge to revisit the agential potentials of silence was launched, but it would take some years before political theorists took heed of it. This is starting to happen now. However, to address the possibilities of agency in silence, political theorists are feeling the need to return to basics: the nature of silence, and the relationship between silence and speech. These are also the questions driving this critical exchange: In what ways is silence *like* speech, and in what ways is it *different*? What can the comparison between silence and speech tell us about the nature of silence, the best ways to identify and study it, and the potentials and dangers it opens for democratic politics?

Sean Gray and Theo Jung start the discussion in this Critical Exchange. Their focus is on communicative silence. Even though silence is not just the same as speech or any other communicative activity, there are many circumstances in which silence can be rightly seen as “saying” or communicating something. But this still leaves us with the question of how exactly silence signifies or enacts meaning (the question engaged by Jung) and whether silence’s meaning production differs from that of speech in ways that might be democratically problematic (the question addressed by Gray).

In dealing primarily with “speaking silences”, whose voice might be stolen, we are moving away from traditional treatments of silence and speech as mutually-exclusive *opposites*. But are we thereby also departing from dominant conceptions of silence as the *absence* of something (for instance, an expected discursive presence) and thus as necessarily *secondary to* that whose absence it marks (that is, speech)? In other words, can silence be a signifier of its own, rather than simply a zero signifier of missing utterances, as Acheson (2008) suggests? Or is silence best understood as embodied practice rather than sign? This is the question raised by the third contributor to this exchange, Toby Rollo. Rollo answers the question positively, but he predicates his answer on a larger shift from a speech- to an action model of political agency, through which silence is conceived no longer as absence, but as a presence of embodied action. This represents a major break from mainstream understandings of politics, and from the implicit hierarchies of agency, humanity, and being that follow from taking speech as its hallmark. I conclude this Critical Exchange by examining the silences of active commission and silences of passive omission, the forms of power and agency a speech-centric model of citizenship and sovereignty presupposes, and how the silent performance of collective political subjecthood might destabilize them.

Mónica Brito Vieira

**Silence as a Mode of Political Communication: Negotiating Expectations**

Aristotle’s dual definition of man as a zôion politikón on the one hand and a zôion lógon echon on the other engendered a rich tradition of thought about the relation between politics and language. In all its multifarious guises, the axiom that – as Hannah Arendt once put it – “speech is what makes man a political being” (Arendt, 1958, p. 26-27) has continued to dominate political thought into twenty-first century. In academic discourse as well as everyday debates, we tend to think of politics primarily in terms of debates, speeches, sound bites, proclamations and negotiations. Circling around values like transparency, accountability and participation, we understand the political as a domain of the expression of the *vox populi*, i.e. in terms of the rights, as well as the duties, to partake in a communicative process pointed toward the negotiation of collectively binding decisions.

For all its many strengths, the idea that politics is fundamentally about the use of voice (in the widest sense) has produced some significant blind spots regarding its counterpart: silence. Under the paradigm of speech, silence in the realm of politics has long been primarily interpreted as its absence, in two distinct, if connected ways. On the one hand, silence ‘from above’ is taken as illegitimate secrecy, shielding the machinations of the powerful from public scrutiny and the necessity of justification. On the other, silence ‘from below’ is understood as the product of various modes of ‘silencing’, denying the powerless their legitimate voice.

In scholarly debates as well as in public discourse, both aspects are ubiquitous. In the controversies about Trump’s ties to Russia, the Brexit negotiations or the actions of WikiLeaks, the legitimacy of a political *arcanum* shielded off from public consideration is the subject of fierce debate. At the same time, arguments about social and political justice are habitually motivated by the intent to break the political silence of disadvantaged groups. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it, “measuring” the silences in the political sphere is considered a vital step toward the critical project “to give the subaltern a voice in history” (Spivak, 1988, p. 283, 286-287, 296).

Their diverse orientations notwithstanding, both views share a fundamentally negative view of silence. In terms of its normative valuation, it appears in a critical light, as something to be ‘broken’ in order that good politics might take place. Conceptually, it is not so much analysed as a phenomenon in itself, but rather as the lack of something else. Informed by this point of view, most analyses of political silences have tended to approach their subject in terms of the harmful absence of political responsibility and/or participation.

Yet in recent years, new perspectives have been gaining ground. Criticizing the one-sided nature of earlier scholarship, authors from various disciplines have emphasized that reducing political silence to passivity and privation loses sight of its many other, including more active and at times positive dimensions: its political role is not confined to retention and repression, but also encompasses forms of wilful renitence and even active resistance (e.g. Jungkunz, 2012; Hatzisavvidou, 2015; Gest/Gray, 2015).

Rethinking the subject in these terms has opened a range of phenomena and functions of political silence that had hitherto received scant attention. These include tactical silences aimed to keep open multiple options, to distract from specific themes, or to attract attention to others; but also symbolic silences, indicating either acceptance or refusal, in- or exclusion, or the openness to further negotiation. In terms of non-participation, political silences are no longer attributed only to the effects of repression, exclusion or indolence, but also to the deliberate refusal to play along in a language game the rules of which seem unacceptable.

Explorations into this hitherto relatively unchartered field of research are already showing results, both in terms of new theoretical vistas and as a point of departure for empirical research (for an overview, cf. Acheson, 2008; Freeden, 2015; Jung, 2018). Yet this newfound fecundity is not without its costs. For all its bustling activity, research on silence still lacks general coherence. Since the 1970s, when silence first became the subject of academic study in philosophy and linguistics before gradually expanding into a wide-ranging, highly interdisciplinary field of research, authors have time and again attempted to arrange the functions, forms and meanings of silence into systematic typologies. Any one of these provides a subtle and often highly intricate categorization – at times identifying up to nineteen different types of silence. Yet in synopsis, these typologies also reveal the severe difficulties they are confronted with (cf. Mayer, 2007, col. 690-691). Their varying, individually exclusive and mutually incompatible categorizations convey the impression of a broad panorama of phenomena, crossed by an array of perspectives, concepts, and questions, but lacking a common analytical focal point. We are left with a sense of arbitrariness, underlined by the fact that the various typologies are hardly ever picked up by other scholars as the basis for new (empirical or theoretical) work.

For all its fecundity, then, current research on silence suffers from the absence of a common frame of reference. There is no agreement on terminology or methodology, there are hardly any shared research questions that would allow a fruitful and critical exchange. Furthermore, the field is characterized by a sterile distance between intricate, but highly abstract theoretical work and empirical studies that are individually interesting but remain mutually unconnected. Too often, interdisciplinary dialogue remains limited to a friendly, but unengaged coexistence. Brave attempts by individual authors to survey the entire research landscape pay a high price for the enormous, archipelago-like terrain they cover (e.g. Kenny, 2011; Khatchadourian, 2015; Corbin, 2016).

In its zeal to overcome the one-sidedness of earlier studies, current research risks losing itself in the repetitive insistence on the sheer multiplicity of aspects, functions and contexts. Without a common centre, the field becomes a sprawling, but purely additive aggregate of proliferating details. In this situation, it seems worthwhile to ask some awkward, but fundamental questions regarding the ultimate purpose of the study of political silences. In general, two ways forward seem to be open.

First, we may interpret this endeavour simply as the elimination of a previous oversight, an extension of the range of studied phenomena, ‘closing a gap’ in the research landscape. Although undoubtedly legitimate, this approach risks remaining peripheral to the various disciplines’ central questions and debates as well as limiting itself to the expansion of an already enormous affluence of studies on individual phenomena and aspects of silence. To avoid these pitfalls, we might secondly approach the issue of political silence not just as part of the field of politics, but as an analytical probe, an instrument with which to fathom a specific dimension of the political field as a whole. Surely, there are multiple viable ways of achieving this goal. Here I want to propose just one possible way of moving forward, focusing on the concept of expectations. Although this is not the place to provide an in-depth development of the theoretical foundations of such an approach, it might be useful to outline some of its basic premises and dimensions. Above all, I hope to show how a (re-)consideration of the dimension of expectations might contribute to the solving of both problems delineated above. First, it would provide the study of political silences with an overarching research focus binding together the multiplicity of theoretical and empirical approaches. And second, it might build a bridge between the issue of political silences on the one hand and wider debates on the field of politics on the other.

Approaching political silences through the analytical lens of the dimension of expectations entails some preliminary decisions. First and foremost, it means focussing on silence as a mode of communication, rather than as an acoustic state predicated of spaces, objects or people. In the last case, we may differentiate the state of ‘being silent’ as description of human behaviour from the ‘uses of silence’ as a mode of communicative action. Embedded in structures of communicative interaction, silence may then be defined as the significant omission of specific signals. This may, but does not have to, entail complete acoustic quiet. Nor does it require the absence of any communicative signals whatsoever. Indeed, the emotional, cognitive, social and political significance of any use of silence can only be conveyed by its embedding in complex structures of other verbal and nonverbal signs. Conversely, some types of verbal utterance are nonetheless interpreted as silence by their audience, either because a specific message or theme is absent from them, or because a particular group or individual fails to be addressed. In consequence, silence as the complete termination of communication is to be distinguished from more focused forms of being silent about something or to someone in particular.

As an example, we may point to German chancellor Angela Merkel, whose eloquent silences are an often remarked-upon feature of her leadership style (Schröter, 2013, p. 113-136). When faced with controversial issues, Merkel often stays aloof, limiting herself to general remarks on the shared purpose and careful procedure of the decision-making process. Without fail, her refusal to take sides then becomes the subject of critical debates in the media about its tactical prudence and moral legitimacy. Such controversies are indicative of the expectation that – in her capacity as German chancellor – she has the responsibility to take position. But at the same time, they also show how such expectations may invite, but do not determine action. Other factors weigh into it, including tactical considerations (e.g. keeping open multiple courses of action), but also conflicting expectations by other individuals and groups.

The case of Merkel shows how someone can be politically silent even if he or she does not stop speaking. But above all, it demonstrates how in the case of silence not only its meaning, but its very existence is a function of a process of negotiation between multiple individuals or groups. The mere intent to remain expressively silent does not suffice for its effective production. Only when this behaviour is recognized as a significant action by others, communicative silence emerges in the sense that further (communicative and other) actions respond to it. Conversely, non-communicative behaviour that was not ‘meant’ as eloquent silence at all – resulting from momentary distraction or the inability to articulate oneself, for example – may still be understood as such by others (“Why are you silent? Are you angry?”) Even in cases in which this is a misinterpretation, such moments still produce effectual silence to the extent that subsequent communication refers to it.

The extent to which the pronounced openness of silence to multiple interpretations can be fodder for political controversy is especially evident in the case of citizens’ silence. Is their non-participation to be understood as an expression of tacit consent (*qui tacet consentire videtur*), of indifference, or of discontent (*le silence du peuple est la leçon des rois*)? Since most modern political systems refer to the articulation of the people’s voice for their legitimacy, its non-articulation in the ‘silent majority’ unavoidably becomes a subject of contention. What is ultimately at stake in such controversies, is the question of what ‘is to be expected’ from particular political actors, both in terms of their ability to articulate their interests and wishes (are they silent on their own account or as a result of silencing?) and of their duties with regard to the political process (is it legitimate to remain silent?).

Since both the character and the effects of any silence are determined by which expected signal, message, theme or audience is perceived to be ‘lacking’, considering differing expectations can be a fruitful basis for the differentiation of its many forms and functions in the political realm. Rather than constructing yet another abstract typology of silences, this approach would imply focusing on the mutual expectations of various individuals and groups in specific political settings, understanding the situational effects of silence as the result of a process of negotiation about what is perceptible against the background of conflicting understandings of what could have been expected. Above all, it would entail focusing on one particular distinction that is at the root of silence’s ambivalent roles in politics: between silences that are an expected part of conventional structures and those that present a rupture with these.

On the one hand, established hierarchies and relations are regularly expressed through the distribution of moments of articulation and silence. Since these connotations are culturally and historically contingent, silence may be tied to superior as well as inferior roles, depending on the context. In some cases, dignified reticence is not only an instrument, but also a signifier of power. In others, silences may indicate the subordinate’s respect or even the mute impotence of the excluded. Similarly, dynamics of group in- and exclusion are frequently regulated through silences, be it that group cohesion is demonstrated through silent agreement, uninhibited by dis-course, or that the refusal of communication underlines the outsider’s non-affiliation. In this manner, hierarchically structured relations and the distribution of authority and decision-making powers are expressed through the subtle interplay of expected spaces, moments and modes of silence and articulation. Yet if structures of expectation prefigure individual actions, they also provide opportunities for tactical manoeuvre. As political structures, expectations are never simply given, but remain open to disruptions, be it as a result of involuntary misunderstandings or of deliberative non-compliance.

An example of this ambivalence can be found in the role of the silent member of parliament. For most members, their relative inactivity in the plenary debates is an expected part of the parliamentary process. As a result, their failure to speak is not perceived as politically silent at all. Yet while they sink back into the anonymous mass of backbenchers, high-profile leaders, whose position as the ‘voice of their party’ is established, can send powerful political signals by refraining from articulating themselves on particular issues. Since their silence is unexpected, it elicits attention and at times controversy. And in some cases, when the silence becomes prolonged and generalized into a full-flown communicative boycott, it can be a powerful means to put into question the structures of the communicative space of the parliament itself. Thus, silence can be the medium of the confirmation and re-actualization of established political roles and relations, but also of their momentary disruption. The defiant silence where articulation was ‘to be expected’, as well as the ‘breaking’ of habitual silence both present powerful means of challenging prevailing social and political conditions.

In conclusion, a focus on the role of expectations provides a precise yet flexible tool in distinguishing the modes and functions of silence in various political contexts. It avoids both the purely negative view on silence and its equally one-sided heroization in favour of a more differentiated approach. Regarding the crucial distinction between expected and unexpected silences, but also in view of the negation of multiple and conflicting expectations, it avoids reducing the role of silence to a single factor, but rather approaches the political field as a precarious and ever-changing system of relations between multiple actors. In its capacity to distinguish between various grades of intensity with which expectations are ‘enforced’, it can encompass a spectrum of phenomena, ranging from the subtle pressures of social customs, through expressly elicited muteness up to forced silencing – but also the moments of eloquent non-compliance with expected behaviour. As such, it can provide insight into ad hoc cases of silence as well as with its habitualized and even institutionalized forms.

The reorientation of the study of political silences toward a systematic theoretical consideration of the dimension of expectations sketched in this contribution awaits further study. Yet what has become clear already, is that its particular strength lies in its combination of two analytical approaches. In a first step, the varying and often conflicting expectations set on political actors’ communicative behaviour play a crucial part in the interpretation of any phenomenon of political silence. As such, this approach may help distinguish between various modes of silence, but also explain their effects and dynamics in specific circumstances. In a second step, the analytical perspective may be just as fruitfully reversed. The exploration of the uses of silence and the reactions they elicit not only highlights a mode of communication that had hitherto received little attention. It also provides a key to the complex structures of mutual expectations shaping interactions in the political realm. In indicating political actors’ ‘scope of action’ – both in terms of their opportunities for articulation as well as of its perceived legitimacy in terms of expected roles and hierarchies –, the study of political silences points beyond itself to a fundamental dimension of the political field as a whole.

Theo Jung

**Interpreting Silence: A Note of Caution**

The problem with choosing silence is that its meaning is not yours to interpret.  It gets its significance only from the audience that perceives it. By definition, silence is nothing but the failure to utter a sound. So, without the aid of any words or gestures, what is to be inferred from someone’s silence is entirely left to others to decide. This audience-relativity of silence is at once its most politically dangerous feature and its enduring attraction. For a knife-edge case, consider Albert Camus’ (2004) *Les Muets* in which a group of labourers go on strike for better wages. Management doesn’t budge, and the union comes back empty-handed. When work resumes, the labourers go about their jobs without uttering a word. What is most striking about the scene, however, is how silence gets differently interpreted. From the boss’s perspective, the labourers’ silence is dismissed as angry sulking. But, to the labourers’ minds, it is one last expression of a hopeless situation—simply, there’s “nothing to say” (Camus, 2004, p. 408).

In this brief reflection, I want to explore how this happens: how a choice for silence gets misinterpreted. In ordinary life, there is nothing mysterious about the idea that our silence can disclose something about ourselves to others. But, as Camus illustrates, the meanings that are attributed to silence are not always accurate or reliable. I argue that the audience-relative nature of communicative silence raises two problems that empirical and normative political theorists should take seriously. One has to do with the impossibility of accessing the intentions behind a person’s silence. Another problem closely follows. People can be coerced, intimidated, or mislead into keeping silent, which can result in wildly different perspectives about their silence. To theorize silence responsibly therefore requires an appreciation of what makes the choice for silence so much more precarious than speech.

The silent exchange described in Camus’ *Les Muets* is socially and psychologically complex. So, we will need to unpack the central issues involved. The first is a classic dilemma of knowing “other minds”. Kant famously complained that we have only indirect access to what is going on in each other’s heads (Kant, 1997, pp. 200-201). One’s intentions, thoughts, and feelings are (imperfectly) disclosed through linguistic communication, and so are necessarily second-hand. Imagine a scenario where even words and gestures are not available. Someone with whom you have an established relationship—a friend, a family member, a co-worker, or a fellow citizen—turns quiet and unresponsive in your presence. This person’s silence is significant because of your previous expectations. So, you start to search for motives for their silence, likely concluding that it is due to a reactive attitude like anger or disappointment. Perhaps their silence is meant as a punishment for failing to do as you were told.

Of course, punishment is not the only common motivation that people have for silence. We may be politely silent when we listen to others speak, when we shyly hesitate in speaking ourselves, when we tacitly approve of someone else’s behavior, or, simply, when we are apathetic or unaware. Silence has so many meanings that it is a challenge to identify the correct one, even in a face-to-face encounter. So, how could you ever know what specific motivations for silence exist within a large group of tens or hundreds of people? In practice, attempts to interpret the silence of others will invariably rely on circumstantial evidence. A telling facial expression or cue gleaned from context may be all that an audience has to go on, unless a personal explanation for silence is forthcoming. As Rae Langton (2007, p.214) wryly observes: “If you want to know what people think, there is probably no substitute for asking; and even then, in most open circumstances, you still might not find out”.

How, then, is genuine communication through silence possible? A glib answer is “haphazardly”. A better answer draws a distinction between silence-based and speech-based communication. Remaining silent isn’t the same as speaking, despite the fact that scholars sometimes liken choosing silence to a speech act (see, e.g., Jaworski, 1993). But unlike with speech—or, indeed, with almost any illocutionary performance—the communicative effect of silence isn’t independent. Sure, you can *silently* punch me in the nose to express hostility or contempt. But, then, it is the punch that is sending the message, not silence as such. This is also true of many overtly political acts involving silence, such as taping one’s mouth shut, or carrying a sign while quietly marching down the street. Communicating through signs and symbolic actions is importantly different from not talking. Remaining silent can certainly be meaningful. But silence alone cannot be used to ask questions, to raise ideas, to argue, or, in general, to convey propositional content. So, whatever silence communicates must, on my view, be entirely supplied by the audience that (rightly or wrongly) takes it to be communicative.

I think that the fragility of genuine communication through silence is explained by its audience-relativity. For, if it is left to others to determine what a silence means, there is an ever-present danger of misinterpretation. Sometimes, such ambiguity is also a strategic advantage. The boss in *Les Muets*, for example, *thinks* that he understands his employee’s silence— “you are angry with me” (Camus, 2004, p. 405). But a silent employee accused by management of dissent could, if necessary, still plausibly deny that this is what their silence meant. What is more likely, however, is that those in positions of power and authority will disregard any intended meaning of silence altogether. Why actually go to the trouble of following up? If anything, letting things go unsaid has a conservative function. As Thomas Nagel notes, it shields us from uncomfortable truths. Often, “[w]e don’t want to tell people what we think of them, and we do not want to hear from them what they think of us, though we are happy to surmise their thoughts and their feelings” (Nagel, 2002, p. 9).

My worry is not that silence facilitates conflict-avoidance. It is that remaining silent cedes discretion to determine what exactly follows. This concern is elevated anytime unequal power enters the scene. Because the meanings that are attributed to silence depend on its audience, and because these relationships may be characterized by power asymmetries, there will inevitably be opportunities for silence to be twisted to someone else’s benefit. Reasons or motivations may be read into silence that, in reality, aren’t there. What reassurance do we have that the meaning of silence won’t become detached from its original intent? Given the risks, it would be irresponsible not to ensure the opportunity for people to vocally clarify themselves, and to contest any misinterpretations of their silence.

To take stock, I’ve suggested that treating silence as communication is complicated by our inability to know the minds of others. If someone is silent, and will not say why, then there will have to be some guesswork. This interpretative dilemma is further complicated when there is an asymmetric power relationship between an audience and the agent who is silent. Now, let me bring this second issue of power into sharper focus. How do considerations of power shape both one’s decision to keep silent and the conclusions that are drawn from it?

To get our bearings, let’s walkthrough *Les Muets* one last time. Often, relational disparities can lead people to keep silent in situations where they might otherwise speak out. Take the labourers’ impromptu decision to give the boss the silent treatment for being forced back to work without an increase in pay. Camus’ big reveal is that their silence was not intended as a message at all. In fact, the opposite: “their mouths had been closed, they had to take it or leave it” (Camus, 2004, p. 406). To the vulnerable employee, escalating a conflict is not worth risking a job. A threat does not need to be explicit if it is mutually acknowledged. Especially in the workplace, the mere *anticipation* of harmful consequences can be enough for a subordinate to feel “frozen in silence” (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, p. 949). Any hint of coercion in a relationship may be all that is necessary to transform the decision to remain silent into something that is prudent, if not compulsory. To see this, nothing more is required than an apprehension of the power differentials involved.

Here is another—more controversial—way that the appearance that silence is voluntary might be misleading: people adapt. Martha Nussbaum (2000, p.42) gives the example of a middle-class woman who, despite her relative affluence, is told “never to question male authority, and taught norms of female submissiveness, silence, and innocence”. One result of this woman’s “lifelong socialization and absence of information,” according to Nussbaum (2000, p.139), is that she does not have the words to articulate the wrongs and injustices that she has experienced. Instead, she tailors her preferences based on bad life circumstances. In an epistemic environment that is oppressive, where people’s perceptions of their options are distorted, it is troubling to think that silence communicates at all—let alone sincerely. If a person’s decisions are adapted to the diminished possibilities of choice, then nothing authentic is being conveyed. In my view, all that has occurred here is an epistemic injustice. There are “blanks where there should be a name for an experience which it is in the interests of the subject to be able to render communicatively intelligible” (Fricker, 2007, p. 160).

True, the dynamics underlying silence can play out in ways other than those described. In principle, I agree that a choice for silence can indeed be uncoerced and voluntary. Yet, I would add that, from the audience’s perspective, we cannot reliably distinguish a silence that is freely chosen from silence that is involuntary. As I have argued elsewhere (Gray, 2015), this problem takes on a larger importance within liberal-democratic political systems. Political scientists have extensively documented the deficits that accrue when ordinary citizens don’t share their opinions through voting, deliberating, protesting, and other vocal means. If enough people are silent in a democracy, this can deprive the broader public of crucial information about where majority opinion in fact lies (Kuran, 1995). The result can be a “spiral of silence” that gives the false impression of popular support for a government’s decisions and policies, precisely because nobody is willing (or able) to say otherwise (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). This same gap has often been exploited by opportunistic politicians claiming to represent the unspoken views of a “silent majority” of citizens. It is only because silence can be seen as communicating approval that we can get such pernicious misinterpretations of silent citizenship in the first place.

What lessons can be drawn from this brief discussion? By way of conclusion, let me sound a final note of caution. Communicative silence does not just hold new possibilities for political agency and self-expression; it also opens up opportunistic ways for silence to be abused. The inferences that are drawn from silence by its audience can, and often do, bear no resemblance to what was intended. Even a choice for silence among relative equals can have multiple interpretations. This audience-relativity is, in my view, both a feature and a bug. We must do justice to the fact that there is a communicative dimension to silence, while also explaining what is troubling about any relationship in which people are no longer willing or able to speak.

Sean W.D. Gray

**Two Political Ontologies and Three Models of Silence: Voice, Signal, and Action**

Questions around the essence and importance of silence have emerged in many fields of study, from ecology to theology. In political theory, the question of silence has garnered interest for its perceived role in traditions of liberal democratic thought. Until recently, the predominant political conception of silence has remained rather unsophisticated, describing the simple absence of political action and usually connoting some excessive exercise of power. What makes the study of silence of interest to students of democracy is that it bears directly on issues of political agency and inclusion.

Differing conceptions of political silence entail differing ideas of what it means to act politically – to affirm, contest, or modify collective norms – as well as what it means to be excluded from acting politically. The more sophisticated and complete our concept of silence, the better we might understand the fulfilment of democratic ideals of equality, reciprocity, and participation, all of which inform the democratic principle of affected interest: the idea that those who are affected by changes in norms of conduct and governance must exert an influence on that change, usually in proportion to the degree they are potentially affected, and in-keeping with their particular capacities for influence. Insofar as a model of political agency and silence aspires to promote democratic legitimacy, then, we can evaluate that model according to how well it attends to the inclusive principle of affected interest.

In this contribution, I will describe three models of political agency and silence – voice, signal, and action – which, I argue, are predicated on two distinct and oppositional presuppositions about politics or political ontologies: linguistic and embodied. Part of the value of exploring silence, I suggest, is its potential to bring to light more inclusive frameworks of political agency. We can evaluate models of silence and the ontologies that subtend them according to their propensities to exclude any of the diverse forms of everyday agency exercised by political actors.

Enlightenment precepts of human rationality and perfectibility produced the modern liberal vision of inclusion and equality, which is identified with the capacity for speech. This popular union of agency and speech means that the absence of speech – silence – is widely understood as the absence of action. Silence is taken to describe an effect of power in concealing the actions of the powerful, excluding the voices of citizens, or when citizens resign themselves to power (the “tacit consent” of the governed). According to the voice model, citizens are silent whenever they refuse or are refused the opportunity to speak.

Although the voice model of silence and agency remains tacit and has not yet been fleshed out as a formal theoretical account of political action, it has been profoundly influential in shaping the political discourses and institutions of modern liberal democracy. Demands for inclusion are customarily framed in terms of voice, while critiques of power, domination and erasure are consistently depicted in terms of silencing the marginalized or the silence of the powerful on issues of marginalization. Historically, given the organization of liberal representative democracy around speech-based institutions (Parliament, of course, being structured around *parler*: to speak) the opposition between speech and silence served as the dominant framework for understanding dynamics of power in modern democratic institutions.

The centrality of speech in political discourse frequently advances a conflation of non-verbal forms of embodied action with voice or representation. Forms of agency involved in direct action, prefigurative practice, public protest, artistic expression, and other forms of dissent are colloquially referred to as reflecting the ‘voice of people’ even when they do not operate through utterances, verbalization, or even symbolic means. Likewise, groups who challenge norms in their actions but do not have the capacity for speech, such as many children or peoples with communicative or cognitive disabilities, are depicted as “being heard” indirectly, by proxy insofar as their interests are estimated in the speech of self-selected representatives. For some scholars of childhood and disability, these conflations and absorptions of diverse forms of agency under the rubric of voice have the effect of obscuring both the diversity of peoples and the capacities for agency they exercise. The prevailing institutional preoccupation with speech also has the propensity to invite vulnerable citizens to waste their negligible resources struggling to gain access to platforms of speech that are saturated with power dynamics and, as a result, demonstrate extremely poor deliberative quality. In addition, the privileging of voice as the primary solution to the problem of domination promotes ongoing deliberation in ways that defers or abjures action on urgent issues. In this regard, the voice model of silence and agency is seen to offer an insufficiently critical depiction of both agency and institutions, one that is in tension with a robustly inclusive and legitimate democratic politics from the perspective on non-speakers.

Recently, this purely negative conception of silence-as-absence has been critiqued as inadequate and even dangerous to the extent that it obscures politically productive uses of silence. Corrections to the prevailing conception of silence generally follow what I will refer to as the signal model. While it is true that silence can refer to an effect of power imposed undemocratically and illegitimately on citizens, the signal model recognizes that silence may also refer to the ways in which withholding speech is significant in itself, and perhaps even a legitimacy enhancing exercise of citizen power. Such an amendment to our interpretations of political silence is necessary because the voice model has historically enjoyed a commanding influence on the structure of democratic institutions, wherein the binary opposition between inclusive speech and exclusionary silence tends (paradoxically) to inform a hierarchy of action in which speakers are privileged over non-speakers. The signal model offers a corrective in which silence sometimes indicates a citizen’s intentional act of withholding speech, the meaning of which is determined by what that omission signals in the context of communicative interaction. To better capture the diversity of factors behind the withholding of speech, nuanced typologies of silence have been developed to expand beyond the narrow popular view of silence as a regrettable effect of power.

The more expansive signal model of agency and silence is prevalent in more sophisticated academic approaches to political subjectivity such as hermeneutics and deliberative democratic theory. The signal model does not wholly abandon the depiction of silence-as-absence found in the voice model but, rather, invites us to appreciate how the absence of speech can be significant, intentional, and productive rather than categorically passive and non-agential. To that end, silence can be interpreted as a kind of *non*-locutionary speech act whose perlocutionary force is experienced in a context of those expected or anticipated utterances that are withheld.

While superior to the voice model, the signal model offers an incomplete depiction of political agency; overlooking those who act in silence to challenge political norms in contexts without reasonable expectations of speech. As I shall argue, like the voice model, the signal model harbours a subtle conflation of speech and action, where the meaning of speech’s absence is derived entirely from the context of speech – past and future - within which the absence of speech is employed.

The central motivating observation in what I will refer to as the action model is that people often do things *with* silence but they also do a great many things *in* silence. In our everyday lives, we establish, challenge, and modify norms through our physical interactions with others and institutions. Thus, one could argue that the concept of political silence cannot refer only to meaningful absences of speech but should also extend to the meaningful actions performed by agents. Once this aspect of political action is acknowledged, however, we can also recognize the way in which physical actions (deeds) provide the normative grounding for almost all modern political speech. If we say one thing and do another, our fellow citizens will be influenced by the truth they identify in what is *done* over what is *said*. Likewise, when we fail to say what is expected of us, when speech is absent, our fellow citizens will look to what we *do* to find the significance of that absence. As Aristotle noted, in matters of action when words and deeds conflict, it is the deeds that we trust (NE, 10.1.3, 1172a.35). More often than not, however, our fellow citizens will be influenced by our deeds irrespective of what we say or fail to say. Political life is categorically unlike the realm of abstract scientific discourse, or of self-referential mathematical proofs - it is not a self-contained economy of purely semantic or symbolic meanings ungrounded from physical action and agency. Politics is a realm of embodied agents in practices of coordination and conflict *to which* political speech refers and *against which* the meaning of political speech is measured. In the beginning was the deed, as Wittgenstein put it, the “rough ground” of our practices that reflects a form of life within which both our words and the absence of words have their meaning.

The action model takes seriously the primacy of practice as a basis for understanding political life and this has consequences for inclusivity and democratic legitimacy. Notwithstanding the conventional definition of politics as the domain of word *and deed* (speech *and action*), in modern political thought the fulfilment of democratic ideals has been almost exclusively predicated on speech. The action model of silence aligns with the signal model in its rejection of the binary opposition between speech and silence; meaningful speech and silence can be co-present and so are not best conceived of as mutually exclusive. It is distinct from both the voice and signal models, however, in conceptualizing silence as a *presence* (of embodied action) as opposed to an *absence* (of speech). Contemporary democratic theory centres on citizen speech and its institutions function to facilitate and respond to citizen speech. As such, democratic politics tends to overlook the agency of silent citizens. For some, like many children and peoples with disabilities, silent action is the only form of political agency available. Able-bodied adults usually have a choice of whether to (a) issue a meaningful utterance, (b) invoke a meaningful absence of speech, (c) perform an action made meaningful in coordination with an invoked absence of speech, or (d) perform a meaningful action in silence. Many people do not enjoy this range of choices or view them all as viable strategies for influencing changes in norms, and so it would be inaccurate to claim that they are utilizing the absence of speech to emulate a speech act or signal something.

It is important for any political theory of silence to recognize and incorporate diverse forms of agency. Unfortunately, the focus speech in the voice and signal models results in the differences between these forms of agency being mostly obscured, especially with respect to silent action. In these respects, the action model offers a more complete depiction of political agency and is therefore more compatible with an inclusive democratic politics; it preserves the phenomena of peoples who act in silence without an expectation of speech, in order to act politically.

Claims about the nature of political agency are always derived from basic presuppositions about *what politics* *is* and, therefore, what terms like voice and silence best describe. Where ontology concerns the existence of fundamental ideas and entities, *political* ontology concerns the fundamental character of norm-bound communities and relations of power: Precisely *what* is it that makes our social existence political? I would like to argue that the difference between the action model, on the one hand, and voice and signal models, on the other, appears to be a disagreement between two distinct presuppositions about political life, which I will describe in terms of the difference between *linguistic* and *embodied* ontologies of political life.

The voice and signal models are rooted in a linguistic ontology of politics that presupposes norm-bound communities are constituted through language-use. What distinguishes fully-human agency from mere quasi-human or animal behaviour is the negotiation of meaning through language. This view has a long history in political thought. It is driving assumption behind the Enlightenment hypothetical construction of political life as preceded by a pre-political state of nature. In this respect, the voice and signal models are closely aligned with the liberal social contract tradition according to which collective life is held together through the ongoing deliberations over how we ought to conduct and govern ourselves. A political ontology of speech posits language as the *sui generis* origin of shared meaning. The meaning of speech and silence here is often viewed as bound in the hermeneutic circle of language and interpretation, within which the significance of silence is understood as parasitic on language-use. But whereas silence in the voice model is negatively associated with the absence of politics, a return to the unchecked power and uncivilized violence of the state of nature, the signal model recognizes that the absence of speech can sometimes qualify as a kind of quasi-linguistic act that productively addresses norms.

One major problem with linguistic ontology of politics is that it anchors a conceptual hierarchy of being that is incompatible with democratic ideals. The premise that language-use exemplifies a *fully*-human form of agency speaks to a developmental logic according to which able-bodied adult speakers are categorized as more developed, mature, or civilized than non-speakers. Sometimes non-speakers are viewed as exercising a primitive form of political agency, but the idea that children and peoples with disabilities who cannot speak have political agency is often categorically denied. Non-speakers exist in a pre-political world and must therefore be included in politics through mechanisms of representation. This may sit well with liberal political philosophy with its moral precepts of human rationality, but it should not sit well with the concern in democratic theory over inclusion of affected parties in proportion to the degree they are potentially affected, and in-keeping with their particular capacities for influence. Unfortunately, the voice and signal models of silence are largely beholden to thus hierarchy of agency, which intimates a dangerous hierarchy of humanity that may be difficult to shake without abandoning the linguistic ontology. At the very least, linguistic ontologies lend themselves to childism, the denial of childhood agency, as well as ableism and ablenationalism, the conceptualization of citizenship and political belonging around the venerated capacities of able-bodied peoples.

The action model presupposes the existence of a norm-bound community constituted through shared practices and forms of embodied interaction. All known communities feature language, of course, but the emergence of language is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for collective commitments, complex coordination, and contestation. Speakers and non-speakers alike contribute to norms of conduct and governance. The action model of political agency, and the embodied ontology of politics upon which it is predicated, fit well with many critiques of the social contract tradition, especially those which identify the exclusionary propensity of cognitive or communicative thresholds for politics. Resources for understanding this domain of agentic, meaningful, and normative life that inheres in our pre-linguistic and non-linguistic lives can be found in the ancient political thought, speech act theory, pragmatist language theory, phenomenology, feminist theories of care, critical childhood studies, disability studies, animal studies, developmental psychology and cognitive science. It is the distinction made by Wittgenstein between, on the one hand, a context of embodied action and practice he referred to as a form of life, between which there can be intractable disagreements *of judgement*, and, on the other hand, the various language games that emerge within a form of life, a basis of mutual intelligibility that makes it possible to have disagreements *of opinion*. Indeed, it is important to recognize that language is itself a *product* of political community in this regard, for the origins of language and of linguistic meaning presuppose the existence of collective commitments, complex coordination, and contestation over semantic meaning and pragmatic use. It seems doubtful, therefore, that language can serve reliably as a political ontology.

As mentioned in the introduction, I believe models of political agency and the political ontologies that inform those models each aspire to democratic legitimacy and can therefore be assessed according to how well they fulfil ideals of inclusivity as articulated in the principle of affected interest. Insofar as the political ontology of language assumes a *telos* of humanity, a rise out of a primitive state of mere bodies into the intellectual domain of the political. Because the intellectual is privileged over the embodied, the *telos* assumes a hierarchy of being in which speaking agents are paramount. At a normative theoretical level, such hierarchies of being are incompatible with democratic politics predicated on equality and inclusion. At a practical level, the hierarchies inform the institutional exclusion of agents who do not use speech, placing them at greater risk of neglect or targeting by political institutions. Some people, such as some Indigenous peoples, may refuse to speak because relations of power have pre-determined the meaning of their utterances (see Langton, 1993). Understanding that it is the context which predetermines the meaning of their utterance, these peoples focus on the practices and ceremonies of their communities rather than public dialogue. They also take their silent interactions with land and animal species to be educative and politically meaningful, even though there is no expectation of speech and therefore no politics from the perspective of the voice-model.

Perhaps the most significant advantage of the action model of silence and the embodied ontology of politics is that they do not harbor any implicit hierarchy of agency, humanity, or being. Not only are they inclusive of the range of agency exercised by human beings, including children and peoples with disabilities, they also reject the western developmentalist scaffolding upon which the modern has been historically venerated over the pre-modern, the civilized over the uncivilized, and the rational over the emotional. The approach is amendable to understanding the agency and meaningful contributions of animals and non-human nature, which may be crucial to future of work on the environment.

Understanding the political meaning of silence invites us to reconsider the nature of politics itself and this has the potential to enhance democratic life and legitimacy. If silence is construed as the absence of meaningful agency (voice) or the meaningful absence of speech (signal), then citizen speech will remain the primary focus of political discourse and institutions. Hierarchies and developmental frameworks in which non-speakers are subordinated to speakers will remain, serving as the presuppositional platform upon which hierarchies of race, class, and gender are often erected. If, however, silence is construed as the meaningful domain of political action performed by both speakers and non-speakers, then discourse and institutions will have to shift dramatically toward a more inclusive politics.

To take the action model of silence seriously is to reorient political analysis around a new ontology of embodied actions that avoids the fetishization of speech in which democracy is reduced to linguistic and symbolic interaction. It also entails critiquing institutions that are designed primarily or exclusively around speech for their exclusion of silent citizens. That we do not have a full understanding of what sorts of institutional reforms would be required to accommodate the embodied agency of non-speakers is in part a function of the hegemony of the linguistic political ontology. Part of what makes the question of silence so daunting is that it may entail a significant disruption of orthodox political ideas though such radical shifts may be necessary to address urgent problems of exclusion, inaction, and inefficiency that plague modern approaches to conflict, economics, and the environment.

Toby Rollo

**Silent Agency**

Our logocentric culture presupposes and implies a specific view of agency, modelled after the creative effectiveness of the divine word (Fiumara, 1990). The ability to create an altogether new state of affairs in its speaking defines God’s sovereignty, understood as command and control. Both are forms of power *over* – what gets done and who gets to do it –, exercised by means of powerful verbal constructions.

The expectations surrounding popular voice and the democratic citizen’s right to have a “say” in government reproduce this understanding of power, albeit in a diluted form. “Say” stands now for *influence* on government – who holds power, how power is used, to what ends. Being capable of powerful verbal constructions – notably, vote, petition, protest, discussion, persuasion, deliberation – separates citizens, as agents of democratic self-rule, from subjects, deferring to heteronomous verbal impositions. But while the right to speak on public matters is the trademark of citizenship, a singular focus on the speaking citizen promotes the *hubris* of speech and the forms of power it implies over alternative forms of power and agency.

Where speech is equated with action and strongly intentionalist models of agency, silence stands for inaction. Silence can, however, be produced in two broadly distinct ways: by passive *omission* and by active *commission* (Scott, 2017). Silence as an act of *commission* is *doing* a non-something. It occurs when I choose, or take a positive decision, to *do* a non-something, most notably *not to* say, mention, or tell. This is the case with the so-called *insubordinate* silences – to protest, to resist, and to refuse (Jungkunz, 2012). Such silences are best understood against the something they do *not* do: i.e., against the background ofcommunicative expectations they deliberately disregard, betray or openly challenge.

By contrast, silence as an act of passive *omission* is a *not*-doing something resulting from a *non-*decision. It occurs when we *neglect* or *fail* to act, not as a matter of *choice* or *conscious* intent, but as a *default* behaviour. As an incorporated *habitus* silence acts almost as an *unconscious*, not as a modality of self-expression. It goes thus easily unnoticed to oneself and others, and can be readily dismissed as “natural” or irrelevant. But where it is noticed it can feel menacing as a potentially dangerous “outside” in an otherwise linguistically coded world. Hence, silences of omission come often maligned (as in the “lazy”, “neglectful” silent exit of abstainers) or assigned a reassuring meaning (namely, quiescence). Both “neutralizing” strategies confer agency on silence (if only to sometimes deny it to the “silent” agents themselves): people who *fail to* do are presented as *choosing* not to.

To read such silences as “choice” seems too intentionalist a conclusion to draw, however, and one much determined by the dominant conception of the political subject as a linguistic rather than an embodied being. Some people do abstain from political participation for reasons of consent or protest. But survey data tells us that disadvantage and non-participation are closely related. Rather than a *choice*, silence as an act of passive omission might, in most instances, reflect a sense of social-worthlessness and the concomitant disposition of resignation. The resulting silence will then be *unintentional*, but it might still *communicate*, albeit indexically – it might give *presence* to the embodied experience of powerlessness. In turn, our unwillingness to listen *out for* such silence might translate mere avoidance of responsibility, and its definition as absence may be part of a strategy of silencing by maintaining “the pretence that there is nothing there to be heard” (Muers, 2004, 24).

While silence as active *commission* and silence as passive *omission* capture something that is analytically distinctive about the phenomenon of humanly produced silence, they are overly simplistic categories for grasping the complexity of real-world silences. This is primarily because, for all their difference, both categories reduce silence to either a chosen or enforced activity, presupposing thus a sovereigntist model of individual agency, understood as self-determination or control over one’s actions (Krause 2015). This is the kind of agency silence as active commission *ascertains* and silence as passive omission *denies*, only to re-install it *via* the audience’s imputation of intention. Yet our ability to *act*, and to *impact* the world, depends not exclusively on ourselves, but on *whether* and *how* others sustain our agency, namely on *whether* and *how* others engage, interpret and respond to what we do. Understanding this helps us to better understand the complexities of silent agency.

First, it takes us beyond the binary speech vs. silence, by pointing towards ways in which speech and silence might be co-occurring. Insofar as the conditions of human agency are imminently intersubjective, and depend on others sustaining our intentions, we might find ourselves silenced even when we *choose* to speak, but there is a systematic uptake failure, whereby we find themselves able to say *only* that which we are *heard* to say (Langton, 2009).

Second, the recognition that speech is a statutory ability rather than a universal competence leads to another, related realization: that silence also has a statutory dimension. Silence is often presented as cost-free or, at least, as low-cost, when compared to speech, and therefore as “democratic”, because universally accessible. But to claim this much is to forget the “Who, whom?” question of politics. The capacity to *be* or *remain* silent speaks to being in positions of relative power. Take, for instance, political authority. Commonly defined as the capacity to speak authoritatively – to command and exact obedience, political authority is also construed out of moments of silence. Such are, for instance, those moments in which interlocutors are deliberately ignored, just not to be engaged; or those moments in which all appeals must cease, and no (more) justifications need giving (Allen 2001). Conversely, radical submission to authority entails not just the denial of all rights of speech, but also, and importantly, of the right to silence.

Third, finding agency within silence often involves wresting agency from extant configurations of power, placing agents under highly asymmetrical power relations, which significantly constrain the range of options available to them. This insight lies behind the common assertion that silence is the political weapon ofthe oppressed and the poor. While there is undoubted truth to this, the understanding that agency might be non-sovereign yet vigorous helps us resist fatalism. One can find agency even in situations where one is hardly in control of any of the external factors that constrain the range of options within which one decides *not* to speak. This is most dramatically exemplified by the refugee who tries to avoid deportation by refusing to speak or provide details about this identity and provenance (Wagner 2012). In this and similar cases, silence is a very fragile freedom *from*, protecting one from detection and interference by a powerful actor – the state. But it is agential nonetheless.

Fourth, silence need not always undercut what we are able to *do* or *become*. It can effectively be the site of our *doing* and *becoming*. This is worth stressing, if only because silent agency is commonly associated with identity *negation* rather than identity c*reation* (Asenbaum, 2018). Accordingly, silence is either taken for the mark of unfreedom or as affording, at best, negative freedom: a place of freedom *from* (detection, interference, intrusion) rather than freedom *to* make oneself and the world (Brown, 1996: 197). Our identities are formed through speaking and being spoken to. Silence represents the possibility of practising freedom *within*, and in resistance *to*, a hegemonic discourse, which makes us what we are while confining us to determinate vocabularies of self-articulation.For all its emancipatory potential, however, this silence is still reactive rather than creative, creation remaining tied up with being “heard, seen, recognized, wanted as a speaking being in the public or social realm” (Brown, 1996: 197). While it is true one cannot properly be if excluded from the outset from the position of a possible subject of discourse, to identify the subject with the subject of speech is to rule out silence as a form of identity performance. Where equated with unknowability, undetectability, and unreachability, silence offers a protection from discourse which is never altogether free from its violence. This alignment of silence with concealment and defensiveness overlooks the ways in which silence is communicative and allows for self-expression.

Identity negation and identity creation are not so easily separated however. Silence does not simply negate identity: the refusal to break silence can be part of the enactment of one’s identity; what is more, silence might signify “the possibility of a multiplicity of identities”. (Ruiz, 2013: 275). Silence need not be strictly defensive it can be positively constitutive of subjectivities, especially new, liminal, and fluid subjectivities. An active silence can be part of what makes them what they are, rather than a sign of something being done to them which necessitates silent unknowability as a form of resistance. Also, when it comes to collective subjectivity, silence is seen as hampering its formation.

The political condition is one we normally see as realized *in* and *through* speech. This assertion has *two* distinct dimensions to it. The *first* relates to the prevalence of the speaking subject as the figure of sovereign will. Behind this lies the assumption that agency in communication lies mainly, if not exclusively, with the speaking subject, silence being *ipso facto* expelled from it. The power of speech as the power of sovereign control (doing things *to* others and the world *with* words) comes into relief through its contrasting with listening as the activity of the subjected or the weak – silence becoming either “expressive inability” or “imposed muteness” (Fiumara, 1990: 99). This forecloses the possibility of active silence, of doing things *with* or *in* silence, most notably of taking “keeping silence” for an “active, creative, politically and ethically significant” activity (Muers, 2004: 49), enacting what might be an alternative, decentred and non-sovereign model of agency, in which “the listener acts by allowing herself to be acted upon” and opening herself to the risk of the unexpected (Muers, 2004: 57).

This takes me to my final point. We have come to believe that only speech can sustain collective agency because only it can create an in-between and is thereby capable of establishing the relations that might bind us to one another. Silence, by contrast, is taken as the sign of withdrawal, break of communication, or a severing of relations. But we make silence together: in effect, we cannot make meaningful silence otherwise. We speak in turns, but silence can only be meaningfully produced and maintained *among* and *between* people (Jaworski, 1993: 10). This requires cooperating activity, and disrupts normal categories of power and authority (whose silence is it, anyway?). Because everyone and anyone can break silence, silence is heard as a unified whole. However, instead of erasing difference, cooperatively enacted silence might be agonistic, or the in-common that establishes “the condition of possibility for differences to emerge, but also for a universal identification in difference to take place.” (Saldaña-Portillo 2003: 196). This silence is not simply a void or a zero signifier for missing utterances. Nor is it simply a response to domination by those who perceive themselves as excluded. Its keeping constitutes rather a remaking of our world, by explicitly refusing to shape it through yet another “discursive bid for hegemony” (Brown, 1996: 197).

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