

## **On the Importance of Civil Discussion in an Era of Polarization**

### **The Crisis of Civil Society**

It has been a long time since political discourse has been as polarized as it is in the world today. Deep gulfs have opened between left- and right-leaning groups in developed and in developing countries. These gulfs are reflected around the world in debates about immigration, refugee policy, national identity, economic distribution within and between countries, and globalism vs isolationism. In many individual countries local issues, including debates about health care, religion in public life, or ecological policies are also characterized by yawning chasms separating partisans on each side.

The ubiquity of this situation around the world is staggering. Its potential consequences are terrifying, for it threatens the very possibility of the civil debate and discussion that advances democracy, builds communities, and binds people to shared visions of the common good and of routes to achieving it. Public discourse, as Kant pointed out in the *Aufklärung* essay, as Mill argued in *on Liberty*, and as philosophers including John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have emphasized more recently, is the beating heart of democracy and of civil society. Without a robust public sphere in which ideas can be exchanged, criticized, amended, and put into practice with general consent, there is no real democracy or civil society, no matter how many elections are held. And the public sphere can only function effectively if discourse is open and respectful.

Civil discourse, however, is rapidly being replaced by abusive shouting matches. These interchanges not only fail to move those to whom they are directed; they also solidify boundaries between mutually antagonistic groups and prevent the opening of lines of communication in the future. Given the necessity of broad public dialogue for progress on the range of problems that we as humanity face, including the existential threats posed by climate change, this situation is simply catastrophic.

### **The Causes of the Collapse of Civil Discourse**

The collapse of civil discourse has several roots. The first is simply fear. Are there other roots? Humanity as a whole, and nearly every nation on earth, is threatened by a multitude of catastrophes. I have already mentioned climate change, which will lead to a host of crises. War is also prevalent, as is income inequality. These in turn lead to mass migrations that inevitably change the social fabrics of societies from which migrants depart and those to which they arrive.

Such change can be terrifying, and fear of change leads to the hardening of positions and to the demonization of interlocutors, a demonization that allows all parties in the debate to ignore the positions and words of those with whom they disagree, and to retreat into echo chambers that only amplify these attitudes.

Massive ideological differences constitute a second root of this collapse. These differences are accentuated by the fear of change just noticed, and by

globalization. These differences lead to contests between open and closed societies; democracies and totalitarian forms of government; pluralistic vs monocultural nation states; religious vs secular societies; societies committed to unilateralism vs societies committed to multilateralism. The positions taken in these debates are so antagonistic to one another that it is hard to find a basis for communication between opposing parties.

A third root of this collapse is the moralization of all political discussion. Since these issues are each of the greatest importance to those involved in these debates, it is easy to map each disagreement into a battle between good and evil, and each partisan is convinced that he or she is on the side of the good. Since there is no need to take evil positions and evil people seriously, they reason, there is no need for reasoned debate. Once again, positions harden, and the echo chambers become more crowded and more impervious to input from outside.

Finally, modern modes of communication, including both social media and privately held or state-sponsored ideological media outlets serve to amplify difference, to falsify information, to inflame fear, xenophobia and hatred, and so to polarize discussion even further. Since most of the world's people receive their news and information from a single or a small number of sources, the very idea that other views may be cogent and deserving of respect, or that those with whom one disagrees may be well-intentioned becomes inconceivable.

### **The Way Forward**

If this situation persists, there is no hope for the future. No problems can be solved; no progress can be made; no common purpose can be forged. The polarization of society we are witnessing is a mortal threat to democracy itself, and so to human civilization. It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to strive to communicate across boundaries. To do this, we must—except in the most heinous cases—take our apparent opponents as our interlocutors; take those who disagree with us as decent human beings who may well see something that we do not; and we must refuse to close discussion.

This can be hard. Nearly all of us have succumbed to the tribalism I have been outlining to some degree, and we each have a responsibility to step back from this attitude. I suggest engaging someone with whom one disagrees seriously in dialogue, dialogue that involves listening as well as arguing, and listening with a genuinely open mind and heart. I suggest reading or listening to the media of the other side with a goal of understanding and serious engagement. I suggest adopting a bit of detachment from one's own positions so as to see how they might be offensive to others.

This is not an admonition to surrender your views and values, and to agree with everything said by those with whom you disagree; it is an admonition to engage effectively. If you are seriously committed to your ideas, to your politics, to your values, and to your projects, you must be committed to advancing them successfully. I guarantee you that this is impossible in the context of a polarized shouting match. You will only convince those you need to convince by open, respectful dialogue, conducted in a spirit of mutual commitment to rationally

achieved consensus. Without this, there is no hope for solving the big problems of our time, neither in our own countries, and nor even at a bilateral or multilateral level.

Of course there are exceptions. There are those whose views or methods are so egregious, immoral, harmful that rational dialogue with them, or even respect for their views is impossible. For instance, we cannot engage in serious dialogue with *genuine* Nazis, *genuine* Klansmen or *genuine* Boko Haram terrorists. Their views are so far from rational, so far from reasonable, and so morally repellant that they cannot be taken seriously as possibilities. In these cases we must simply engage in a power struggle, with all that that entails.

These people, however, are rare, and their views are only operative at the fringes of discourse. And so this should not ever be our default position towards those with whom we disagree. All too often, however, we find people demonizing those with whom they disagree by assimilating them to Nazis, Klansmen, Islamist extremists, Communist revolutionaries, etc... This then becomes an excuse to avoid civil discourse, and kills the possibility of an effective public sphere. And indeed, this is almost always an untenable exaggeration of the views of others.

It is time to replace this default with an assumption of fellowship. We must resolve to treat those with whom we disagree as participants in the same grand project, as individuals with whom in principle we can forge agreement, as interlocutors who deserve our respect and who can be expected to return it. And we must make this commitment explicit to them, inviting our adversaries to become our conversation partners. Only then is there the possibility of learning from others when we are wrong; only then is there the possibility of advancing our own views if they are indeed correct; only then is there the possibility for forging communities in which we would care to live.