
Critical Exchange

The Nature of Silence and Its Democratic Possibilities

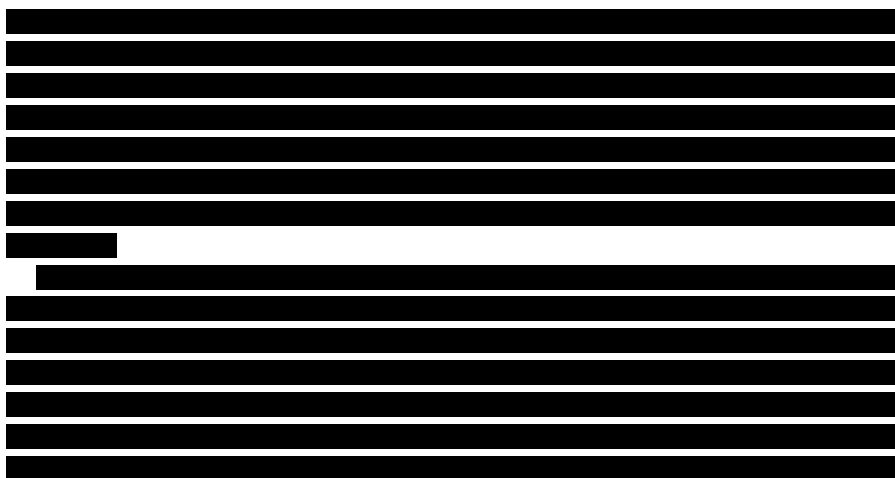
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Silence as a mode of political communication: negotiating expectations

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 various guises, the axiom that – as Hannah Arendt once put it – “speech is what makes man a political being” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 26, 27) has continued to dominate political thought into the 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, pp. 283, 286, 287, 296).

Their diverse orientations notwithstanding, both views share a fundamentally negative perspective on 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 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 and 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 uncharted 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; Freedden, 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, and there are hardly any shared research questions that would allow a fruitful and critical exchange. Above all, 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. On the one hand, it would provide the study of political silences with an overarching research focus binding together the multiplicity of theoretical and empirical approaches. On the other, it might build a bridge between the issue of political silences and wider debates on the field of politics as a whole.

Approaching political silences through the analytical lens of the dimension of expectations entails some preliminary decisions. First and foremost, it means focusing on silence as a *mode of communication*, rather than as an acoustic state predicated of spaces, objects or people. Regarding the last case, this entails distinguishing 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 non-verbal 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, pp. 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, if only to the extent that subsequent communication refers to it.

The pronounced openness of silence to multiple interpretations provides ample fodder for political controversy. This 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.

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 discourse, 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 agency and 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 norms and 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 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

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