

DEMOCRACY AND THE PEDAGOGIES OF DISSENT

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The idea of dissent is central to any understanding of the concept of democracy. No matter how the concept of democracy is theorized -- as representative, deliberative, participatory or statistical -- dissent is an essential ingredient in realizing democratic aspirations. Democracy can only thrive when dissent is not only allowed but is also encouraged. A society cannot be regarded as democratic if its citizens lack the right to question dominant ideologies and challenge the exercise of arbitrary power. The power of dissent is vital for the durability of democracy: its survival depends on it.

Dissent represents an act of citizenship embedded within the historical narratives of democratic governance. It is a mode of articulating and negotiating differences by questioning hegemonic representations of social reality. Invariably, it requires courage, the determination and the will to challenge the assumptions of a system of authority that presumes itself to be uncontestable in upholding a particular set of social, political and cultural arrangements. It refuses the authoritarian practices of

governance, and the attempts to impose a particular form of subjectivity and imagination of the future.

In recent years, we have witnessed numerous examples of courage in acts of dissent. The umbrella movement, for example, displayed dissent against attempts by the Hong Kong government to introduce political arrangements that arguably undermined the general will of the people in Hong Kong. In India, attempts by the state to rewrite legislation with respect to citizenship, which diluted the rights of Muslims and other minorities, demanded dissent and rightly led to wide-ranging protests not only by those who were affected directly but also other citizens committed to democratic ideals.

In Turkey, dissent against the Erdogan Government's attempts to roll back fundamental human rights appears perfectly justifiable, as are the protests against the use of the judiciary to deny fair trials, with the use of draconian anti-terrorism laws. As the Turkish Government has sought to control dissent through the harassment of individuals such as journalists, teachers and other defenders of human rights, activists have had to find more creative means of opposing

the state, of expressing dissent against the arbitrary exercise of power.

Each of these examples shows how dissent demands conviction, commitment and courage. In democratic societies, such qualities are widely admired and even celebrated. Other examples of dissent are however not so straightforward. For example, should dissent against public health orders, as is currently the case in the United States and elsewhere, be equally applauded? Should people be permitted to flout the advice to wear masks or get vaccinated, especially when such dissent undeniably affects the health of others? Should we respect those who doubt the veracity of science, or even make fun of it, for reasons that appear ill-informed, frivolous or politically expedient?

How should we regard such cases of dissent, especially when they are also couched in the language of free speech and action consistent with the principles of democracy? Furthermore, how should we think about dissent when it involves violence against the innocent, no matter how legitimate, or even noble, the cause? The question arises as to how we might determine those acts of

dissent that are praise-worthy and those that are not. What criteria might we deploy to determine some acts of dissent to be illegitimate, without, paradoxically, compromising the core principles of democracy itself?

Dissent of course can take many different forms. It can involve actual, well-considered purposeful acts of public law-breaking. It can constitute a reasoned disagreement with the law. It can involve political mobilization around a set of demands. It can represent a voice against the arbitrary exercise of power. Alternatively, however, it can involve acts of random violence in support of a cultish leader or self-serving causes. In extreme cases, it can call for a full-scale revolution or the overthrow of a legitimately elected government.

Some of these expressions of dissent may of course more defensible than others. When well-established principles of human rights are violated, it has often been argued, dissent is not only appropriate but also critical. However, when dissent takes the form of extreme violence, even in support of human rights, the case for supporting it becomes dubious. In any case, normative claims of human

rights are not universal and have historically been opposed for their marginalization, for example, of women and various subaltern groups. The question arises then: what are the appropriate limits of dissent?

Over the years, political theorists have sought to provide various criteria for defining the limits of dissent. It has been suggested, for example, that when public protests violate the rule of law and effectively seek to subvert an elected government imposing huge costs on the economy and fellow citizens, they cannot be justified. But authoritarian leaders and the state have often been used this criterion to crush perfectly understandable, and sometimes necessary, cases of dissent. Another possible criterion refers to the principle that in a democratic society the will of the majority should prevail, and any attempt to subvert this will cannot be justified.

Beyond these conceptual difficulties, while these criteria are easily specified in abstraction, they are much more difficult to apply effectively in actual practice. It is possible, for example, for the appeal to majority rule to undermine the rights of minorities, as is evident in the case

of India, for example, where the Hindu majority has sought to usurp the interests of the Muslim and other minorities; and, in Pakistan, where conversely the rights of minority Hindu community are similarly crushed. It is precisely in such cases that dissent against the majority rule is perfectly justifiable because while the majority rule may be an integral part of democracy majoritarianism is the very antithesis of democracy.

Abstract normative principles are seldom helpful in defining the forms of protest that should be regarded as legitimate. This is so for a number of reasons, not least because they always need to be applied in particular settings in ways that cannot be self-evidently inferred. Since each context has its own history it has the potential to define when and how particular forms of dissent are appropriate to realize democratic aspirations. Each context suggests a different understanding of legitimacy, and this is precisely what is at issue when considering the limits of dissent.

Nor is it possible to generalize the rule that protest is only defensible when it is used to signal disapproval and opposition to government policy without rendering the

country ungovernable. On the contrary, sometimes it is necessary to repudiate the authority of the state systems. When the legal system itself is used as a tool of oppression, dissent is not only warranted it may even be necessary. Similarly, when the state apparatus is deliberately constructed to reproduce patterns of inequality and injustice, the authority of the state should not be left unchallenged.

However, when the challenges to authority are uninformed, arbitrary and capricious, borne out of ignorance, political vengeance and in slavish support of a charismatic leader or a political group, they cannot serve the purpose of strengthening democratic institutions but are more likely to undermine democratic aspirations. Just as the purported universal rules cannot be taken for granted nor can the arbitrary expressions of dissent.

It should be acknowledged moreover that dissent is seldom encouraged by those in power, but has to be struggled for and achieved through a critical engagement with society, especially when it is structured around various forms of injustice. This requires making some very complex

and difficult political judgments about when dissent is appropriate, how it ought to be expressed, and how it should emerge out of collective and collaborative deliberations. This requires political skills, which have to be learned.

In developing the skills to make judgments about the legitimacy of dissent, education, therefore, has an important role to play. But how? What might pedagogies of dissent look like? What epistemic virtues should such pedagogies consist of? How should these virtues be developed enabling people to think ethically and politically about the particularities of the case, which might warrant dissent in response?

If pedagogies of dissent involve attempts at educating citizens about how and when to dissent then they point to the importance of developing modes of questioning, participation in decision-making processes, and forging habits of critical engagement with the world. Through such pedagogies of dissent, citizens can become educated as agents of change, with a heightened conscience against mass apathy.

Since not every case of protest is equally justifiable, education should strive to instil such an art of political discrimination. It should play a role in helping students to understand that the ethical and the political as two sides of the same coin, that 'civil' society exists at the intersections of state-citizen contracts. It should assist them to realize that dissent itself is governed by certain social, political and cultural norms, which are not absolute but are historically contingent, negotiated in ways that constitute the character of a democratic society.

However, for dissent to be effective, individual efforts are not sufficient. The skills of working collaboratively in opposition to discrimination and injustice are also important if dissent is to contribute to the creation of a transformed and empowered community in control of its own destiny. Learning when and how to dissent should hence be viewed as an act through which civic space is created. In this space, the skills of dissent must include consciousness-raising, coalition building, persuasion and public demonstration are learned, but in ways that ensure

dissent itself does not compromise the aspirations of democracy.

In summing up, education should be viewed as a civic space in which the norms relating to the practice of dissent are negotiated, but in a manner that is itself democratic. In such a space, we learn how the arbitrary and uninformed exercise of dissent in support of an authoritarian leader or a destructive cause has the potential to undermine democracy, while thoughtful, well-informed and collaboratively negotiated acts of dissent have the potential to strengthen it.