

# Summary of the thesis: The Freedom to Remain Silent. The Right to make Qualified Contributions to the Public Sphere

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This book sets out to turn a centuries-old discussion about a particular aspect of democracy on its head. The emergence of the idea of popular sovereignty led, quite naturally, to the question of how best to ensure that the people govern in an appropriate manner. Since it is legitimate to argue that democracy is an *essentially contested concept*, it is also fair to say that consensus has never been reached on a definition of what is and is not appropriate. However, no matter where you stand on the issue, it is an open question how and to what extent the people make decisions that are, in some way or other, for the common good.

At any rate, it has been commonplace since the Enlightenment and the emergence of rationalism to believe that some form of *freedom of expression* is the path to an enlightened public sphere. The line of thought, which I elucidate in the book, has always been that the more voices involved in debating the pressing issues of the day, the better – because scrutiny and the pressure of competing points of view mean that the strongest ideas are likely to prevail.

It is a line of thought that has been discussed and criticised from several perspectives. Indeed, I have previously highlighted several of its inherently problematic assumptions. Despite this lack of consensus, it is fair to say that most people agree that some form of freedom of expression is an important prerequisite for a truly democratic public sphere.

While accepting that this is the case, I wish to supplement this line of thought by adding its opposite into the mix. Just as dialogue and information are indispensable ingredients in a functioning democracy, I want to show that *silence* is also a fundamental prerequisite. With this in mind, I suggest that we supplement thinking about freedom of expression with similar deliberations about *freedom of silence*.

Silence has played a less prominent role in thinking about democracy. When it has been addressed, it has usually been as something to be opposed. The role of journalism as the fourth estate is often seen as preventing the powers that be from silencing troublesome views, “digging up” information that has been withheld (i.e. silenced) and helping the voiceless to be heard. Silence can be, and often is, a means of oppression – at least for some sections of the population. This book seeks to show that silence can also play a *positive* role in developing a fruitful and democratic public sphere.

A project like this is, of course, somewhat paradoxical, since to articulate silence is, in a certain sense, to violate it. It is also quite overwhelming in scope, as silence takes myriad forms. However, my work to date has convinced me that the difficulty of the task is dwarfed by its importance. If we begin to analyse our public spheres through the lens of silence, it becomes clear that a one-sided focus on accommodating a diversity of views means that we overlook mechanisms or structures that are just as problematic and oppressive as actual censorship.

The book rests on twin pillars: first, an analytical one, on the basis of which I will seek to highlight some of the ways in which silence structures public exchanges in ways we may not notice. In a sense, this is about reflecting on silence as an unavoidable condition. The second pillar is a more critical one, where I use the insights from the first pillar to demonstrate how a greater focus on the structures that enable silence can breathe new life into public communicative exchanges and stop them just treading water. This part of the book entails reflecting on how silence is not only a condition, but one that can be operationalised critically.

I present silence as something unavoidable while also identifying its critical potential, because my initial analysis demonstrates that silence as a condition is built on a series of unavoidable aporias that cannot be solved adequately – and yet we must try. This quandary appears in recent German/French philosophy – especially the later works of both Heidegger and Derrida. Indeed, the analytical pillar is built on their work. I compare the thinking about silence in early and late Heidegger (the transition from thinking of silence as a “being quiet” to thinking about silence as something that “silences” or “stills” thought), and in early and later Derrida, in which meaning basically arises through a bringing-to-silence. This is combined with Deleuze’s point that inherent to the mass- and internet-mediated public spheres is an oppressive expectation that we will speak out, an expectation that hinders real and substantial public discussion. In juxtaposing and condensing these writers, my intention is to draw attention to a strong, prevailing theme in their work, albeit one that is often overlooked because it is spread out over so much of their extensive output.

The second pillar is about incorporating these reflections into the philosophical discussion of the democratic public sphere. In a sense, this is the book’s original contribution to philosophy: neither Heidegger nor Derrida display much awareness of what is at stake in democratic public spheres. By incorporating existing thinking about silence into reflections on the democratic public sphere, it becomes possible (again, perhaps somewhat paradoxically) to put into words problems that philosophy otherwise tends to ignore.

This book addresses a number of fundamental questions: how silence plays a productive role in the democratic public sphere; how this role tends to be something of which we are not conscious; and how, in order to avoid hegemonic and oppressive communicative structures, it is important to reflect on the existing structures of silence so that they may be subjected to explicit consideration and negotiation in communicative exchanges. To put it bluntly, it might be said that the democratic value of freedom of expression, -information and -the media cannot simply be measured by the number of

people able to make their voices heard. If everyone says the same thing, confirms each other's opinions or prejudices, or does not bother to listen to what others have to say, then there is no real communicative exchange. If the freedoms mentioned above are to retain lasting democratic value, it is essential to allow for a degree of independence in public discourse – and this independence can prevail through active reflection on the underlying structures of silence.

In other words, public spheres must not be evaluated solely on the basis of what is said or the information and communication conveyed in them. They must also be evaluated in relation to the silence that facilitated these exchanges – i.e. how what is said was made possible by something else being silenced. The point is that this consciousness does not necessarily entail a *problematization*. Rather, I will show that silence is a condition for the ability to relate through language to the prevailing reality. Whenever one form of silence is articulated (and therefore ceases to be silent), it is replaced by new forms of silence. In other words, it makes no sense to strive to *avoid* silence. Merely demonstrating that a concrete phenomenon or problem has been silenced does not in itself constitute a problematization. However, it does constitute a possible step towards critical reflection, as it accommodates an awareness that facilitates critical questioning: is this form of silencing reasonable, fruitful, legitimate, fair, and so on?

The critical value is, therefore, in raising consciousness. Highlighting silence as a democratic focal point creates an opportunity to navigate more *consciously* through existing structures of silence. This, in turn, invites a more reflective approach to silence, which allows us to incorporate the structures of silence into public communication in a more systematic manner. This, in turn, gives the parties involved in communicative exchanges an opportunity to consider, on a more continuous basis, whether the existing structures of silence are appropriate.

## **The main argument**

Reflections on the democratic public sphere often refer to the work of Jürgen Habermas. His seminal, groundbreaking book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first published in German in 1962) started a tradition of analysing the public sphere as an independent object of philosophical study and became the focal point of discussions in this field. Indeed, the understanding of the public sphere put forward in this book also owes a great deal to Habermas' articulation of the deliberative ideal for the democratic public sphere.

Chapter 2 will show that Habermas' book is not, in fact, the *first* philosophical reflection on the public sphere. In texts from the Enlightenment and onwards, we might broadly identify a Germanic tradition (Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard) that looks at the public sphere in relation to the abstract nature of thinking. I will show how this tradition mainly views the public sphere positively, insofar as it functions as a tool to counteract abstract thinking, and, vice versa, negatively,

insofar as the public sphere is seen as a genuine expression of the inherently reductive nature of abstraction.

Opposed to the German tradition, I highlight a tradition that focuses more on liberal problems concerning individual freedom (represented by Madison, J.S. Mill, Schumpeter and Lippmann). This early liberal tradition is based on the assumption that the public sphere needs freedom of expression because it maximises the individual's opportunities to flourish and challenge society. However, this assumption is itself challenged by the fact that more recent traditions show that the individual cannot be counted on to act rationally (neither for their own nor for the common good), which can give rise to an unfruitful field of tension between individual and collective interests.

The field of tension between these two main currents leads, naturally, to two approaches, represented by Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. A brief comparative summary of these two currents emphasises that, insofar as thinking relates abstractly to the concrete, a diverse public sphere (in which many different voices are heard) is one possible countermeasure against abstraction, as it prevents any single pattern of abstraction from attaining unassailable dominance. One way of achieving this might be to give the autonomous individual free and unhindered access to the public sphere. As will be shown, however, both Habermas and Arendt document a certain rapprochement between participants in public communication. In order to come to a mutual understanding, we must accept the horizons of the collective lifeworld reflected in the public sphere. In other words, the communicating parties have to present validity claims that are comprehensible to those addressed.

This analysis, with which I concur, outlines a number of important mechanisms for individuals to overcome their differences, which is crucial from a democratic point of view. However, as several critics of Habermas have pointed out, the concept of the individual flourishing in the collective is also somewhat naïve. In order to be part of a communicative community, the individual must, to some extent, accept the discursive horizon on which the communication is based. The more you are immersed in the communication, the more you run the risk of being swallowed up by its horizons. This dilutes individual characteristics to such an extent that there is a risk of the communication merely treading water because all of the parties involved share the same discursive assumptions and the abstractions inherent in the communication go unchallenged.

In relation to the themes of abstraction and personal freedom, the question is whether participation in communicative exchanges in the public sphere is always the best way of challenging the consensus. Throughout the rest of the book, I will explore ways in which silently holding back can be democratically rewarding – or, in terms of freedom of expression, how *not* expressing yourself can have democratic value. In other words, we should not only enjoy freedom *of* expression, but also freedom *from* expression.

In my attempt to intrude on this debate, I turn to the role *silence* has played in recent German and French philosophy, accounting for appearances in Heidegger and Derrida. The inclusion of Heidegger may at first sound surprising, because his early work in particular is rooted in a great deal of *suspicion*

of the thinking that goes on in the public sphere. Through reflection on how understanding is inextricably linked to the silence that precedes it – which consists inter alia of listening to and obeying the ways in which what is said manifests Being – he points out the inherent danger in public exchanges of the participants being so preoccupied with the exchange that they neglect to listen. When this happens, the exchange degenerates into *Gerede*, which might be translated as “idle chat”. Later on, Heidegger presents a number of suggestions as to how we might observe more closely the ways in which Being arises as a “withdrawing abyssing”. I suggest incorporating thinking about the late Heidegger’s reflections on *Geviert* (the fourfold) when considering the different roles played by silence.

The reading of Derrida will be used to supplement points made by Heidegger, as Derrida has a more subtle analytical view of how the material and intersubjective aspects of communication form meaning in communicative relationships. Derrida focuses on how different aspects of silence facilitate the establishment of meaning – albeit in an incomplete manner. Silence forces the establishment of meaning to include a degree of openness that reduces the participants’ control. The establishment of meaning presupposes that we freely invite the other party to engage in a way that may ultimately lead to our own annihilation.

My reading of Heidegger and Derrida shows that we must incorporate thinking about silence into communicative relationships as something that both sets frameworks and challenges. Silence creates the framework for language and communication but does so by removing something from the communicative horizon. Being aware of this framework makes us capable of thinking about what lies outside it.

According to this interpretation, silence sets the frameworks for language, which also makes it difficult to unambiguously identify all of its effects on language, effects that can be articulated in countless ways, but only if silence withdraws in new ways. We can only reflect on silence by letting it withdraw, which means that there is always more to be said about it. This is clear from Heidegger’s and Derrida’s reflections, which lead in multiple different directions.

In an attempt to bring some of these insights into play and better reflect on the role silence plays in public communications, I will identify and summarise some overall points that can serve as initial suggestions for how to be aware of the ways in which silence works in the public sphere. This summary will then inform my reflections on democratic public spheres in the rest of the book.

Basically, I will suggest that we think of silence precisely as something “outside” language, but “outside” in different ways. It is “outside” in the sense that it limits thinking, but it is also a limit that points beyond itself. Being aware of the role played by silence in establishing meaning opens up this perspective because it makes us aware of the open cracks in language that elude our attention in general usage. Reflecting on the role of silence makes it possible to reflect on how standard methods of establishing meaning are a product of the fact that Being occurs by withdrawing. In other words, it is only possible to establish new meaning because aspects of Being withdraw, allowing other aspects to stand out more clearly.

As a result of this, there is a duality in the treatment of silence in this book. One point is that meaning cannot be established without silence. Silence is always there – at least wherever there is language. On the other hand, the analysis also raises a critical point. Although silence is always there, it tends to evade our attention. When we communicate without being aware of it, silence has *effects* beyond our consciousness or attention.

The latter is not necessarily problematic, since silence is not necessarily a bad thing. However, in a deliberative democratic sense, it is crucial that the public communicative exchange is based on critical reflection. Since structures of silence can be used to promote certain interests in society at the expense of others, it is crucial that we have access to these for the purpose of reflection. The purpose of such reflection cannot be to remove the meaning of silence, but it should at least provide an opportunity for the participants to note *that* it is relevant to reflect on the structures of silence and also that they are never permanent. Discursive deadlocks can be broken by consciously reflecting on the underlying structures of silence. Conversely, such reflections can also be used to introduce an element of discursive opposition when agreement seems to come too easily.

To a certain extent, these critical reflections can take place in the public sphere, but it will be a recurring point in the book that it can be advantageous if parts of the reflection intended to assure the quality of public communicative exchanges occur *outside* the public sphere. The quality of the exchange should not be measured solely by the number of participants and how often they intervene. A strong public exchange presupposes that the agents take breaks from the public sphere.

However, it can be problematic to withdraw from public exchanges, entailing as it does a risk of not being involved in political decision-making. This is one of the correct arguments that inform the emphasis on (for example) freedom of expression as a core democratic principle. If we, as citizens, do not have the opportunity to be heard in public exchanges, there is a risk that the decision-making process will not take into account interests and ideas that we might otherwise have voiced.

All of this means that it takes courage to withdraw from public exchanges – and this need for courage cannot be eliminated completely, since, for natural reasons, it can be difficult to take into account points of view and objections that are not presented. Having said that, the need for courage can be reduced by making the cultivation of awareness of the productive role of silence an explicit task in public exchanges. For this reason, I round off by proposing that traditional thinking about freedom – of the press, of expression, of information, of assembly, of religion, and so forth – be supplemented with an additional consideration. The fruitful democracy, in which the most appropriate decisions are made for the benefit of as many people as possible, presupposes a special form of freedom: *the freedom of silence*.

We need to think of the freedom of silence as a freedom in the traditional sense: as both a *negative* freedom (i.e. not to participate) and a *positive* one that actively facilitates absentsing ourselves from the public sphere. However, we also have to think of it as a task for the individual. If the break from the public sphere is to have any value for the public communicative exchange, it should not be used to

*withhold* knowledge and opinions from the public (drawing on Kierkegaard, I call this *demonic* silence), but to make room for the complexity of existence (which I call *divine* silence), so that we can return to the public sphere as a necessary inconvenience who adds subtlety to and complicates public communicative exchanges, and thereby brings new discursive horizons into play.

## **Let silence come to light – a paradox**

The aim of this book is to bring silence into the light. On a philosophical level, I show that this is an ongoing task because although silence is obviously important in certain contexts, it also plays a role in many contexts where it avoids conscious reflection.

Silence plays a major role in many facets of human existence, and clearly it is not possible to present all of them in a single book. In the academic literature, silence has usually been articulated in religious and artistic contexts. In the field that I have chosen to focus on here – the role of silence in relation to *democratic* issues – it can be said that silence may have played a certain role, but it has usually been seen in *negative* terms, as something to be fought. I seek to add subtlety to this point of view by showing that public democratic exchanges are only possible on a foundation of silence. It is therefore simplistic to think of silence as a challenge to the democratic public sphere.

I would contend that this simplistic understanding of the relationship between democracy and silence stems from the withdrawal through which silence occurs. In addition to the philosophical point about understanding how silence works, I therefore argue that there is a potential *democratic* benefit in illuminating silence. If we are not aware of how silence works, we run the risk of being misled by it, as it shapes public exchanges in ways of which we are not aware, stifling the critical reflection that is so crucial to democratic deliberation.

Enhancing awareness of the crucial role played by silence in democracy entails a number of tasks. First, a discourse analysis that explores the ways in which silence structures language, communicative media and communicative relationships. This is a matter of seeking out the aporetic issues that shape the communication. It is essential that we relate to such aporias, and yet we cannot relate adequately to them (because they contain contradictory fields of tension). However, secondly, discourse analysis is perhaps not best done *in* the public sphere that will ultimately benefit from it. In order to make room for it, the individual needs to take breaks from public exchanges. We do not necessarily optimise the deliberative public sphere by constantly contributing actively to it. Thirdly, media professionals have an important assignment here, too, by facilitating reflection on the importance of taking breaks from public participation.

If we were to apply the point above to traditional democratic concepts, we might say that my proposal aims to restore the balance between freedom of thought and freedom of expression. Traditionally, these have been thought of as two sides of the same coin. The idea has been that freedom of speech is about providing space in which freedom of thought can become democratically

productive. We might say that freedom of speech has been thought of as the public version of freedom of thought. While this book does not completely reject this thinking, it does add subtlety to it. I show that freedom of speech, through being embedded in the pragmatic conditions for communicative action, has a tendency to have a levelling effect on our thinking. The more we need to communicate our thinking meaningfully, the more it also has to conform to a common horizon with the others involved in the communicative relationship. There is, of course, a kind of freedom (of thought) in being able to do this, but I argue that the dialectic is more productive if the individual challenges the communicative consensus in the public exchange. Even though consensus, in the deliberative-democratic sense, must be the ultimate goal, it is important that the path to it is difficult, precisely because such difficulties testify to and invite reflection on the aporetic basis of the communication and the decisions taken.

As such, while the book might be said to identify some problematic aspects of freedom of expression as it relates to freedom of thought, it is not my intention to advocate any tightening of the legal limits of freedom of expression. The solution to the problems of freedom of speech is not to clamp down on freedom of speech. The analysis that freedom of thought requires strong freedom of expression in order to have political significance is correct. To promote freedom of thought by removing freedom of speech would be a fundamental misunderstanding of a number of points in this book. Secondly, on a pragmatic level, we would also face the obvious challenge that any results of freedom of thought would not be heard by anyone other than the thinker. Here, too, freedom of thought and freedom of expression presuppose each other, even as, at the same time, they place obstacles in each other's way.

Ultimately, the analyses in this book culminate in a suggestion that the deliberative correction of the more individualistic-liberal thinking should itself be corrected by a greater awareness of the individual. Just as it is correct when the deliberative perspective points out that the individual is very much defined by the community, so it is also the case that the existence of the community presupposes that we hospitably invite in the enemy.

To a certain extent, this "enemy" can be thought of as the autonomous individual who emerged from the Enlightenment. However, in this book I have argued that this understanding of the individual is insufficient. To conceive of the community as a pool of individual *contributions* is to fundamentally misunderstand the relationship between individual and community. Each individual's contribution, as the deliberative thinkers point out, is largely shaped by the norms of *Verständigung*. These norms can be challenged, of course, but that requires working with the structures of silence. Public communicative exchanges need to be challenged by the individual withdrawing from the community, cultivating a difference that cannot be accommodated in the community, and then rejoining the community.



We must not be naïve and assume that this is something the individual can freely chose to do. Withdrawing from the community carries an obvious risk of becoming the *irrelevant* Other – the silent Other that the others forget because the silent Other is not heard. It takes courage to withdraw. However, the need for courage can be lessened by making the cultivation of awareness of the productive role of silence an explicit task in the public communicative exchange. In this book, I have offered a number of suggestions as to what this might look like. Of course, these are just embryonic thoughts, which can (and should) take many other forms.