Solving the Democratic Problem

Jana Bacevic, University of Cambridge


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3Bl
It is a testament to the lasting influence of Karl Popper and Richard Rorty that their work continues to provide inspiration for debates concerning the role and purpose of knowledge, democracy, and intellectuals in society. Alternatively, it is a testament to the recurrence of the problem that continues to lurk under the glossy analytical surface or occasional normative consensus of these debates: the impossibility to reconcile the concepts of liberal and epistemic democracy. Essays collected under the title *Democratic Problem-Solving* (Cruickshank and Sassower 2017) offer grounds for both assumptions, so this is what my review will focus on.

**Boundaries of Rational Discussion**

*Democratic Problem-Solving* is a thorough and comprehensive (if at times seemingly meandering) meditation on the implications of Popper’s and Rorty’s ideas for the social nature of knowledge and truth in contemporary Angloamerican context. This context is characterised by combined forces of neoliberalism and populism, growing social inequalities, and what has for a while now been dubbed, perhaps euphemistically, the crisis of democracy. Cruickshank’s (in other contexts almost certainly heretical) opening that questions the tenability of distinctions between Popper and Rorty, then, serves to remind us that both were devoted to the purpose of defining the criteria for and setting the boundaries of rational discussion, seen as the road to problem-solving. Jürgen Habermas, whose name also resonates throughout this volume, elevated communicative rationality to the foundational principle of Western democracies, as the unifying/normalizing ground from which to ensure the participation of the greatest number of members in the public sphere.

Intellectuals were, in this view, positioned as guardians—epistemic police, of sorts—of this discursive space. Popper’s take on epistemic ‘policing’ (see DPS, 42) was to use the standards of scientific inquiry as exemplars for maintaining a high level, and, more importantly, neutrality of public debates. Rorty saw it as the minimal instrument that ensured civility without questioning, or at least without implicitly dismissing, others’ cultural premises, or even ontological assumptions. The assumption they and authors in this volume have in common is that rational dialogue is, indeed, both possible and necessary: possible because standards of rationality were shared across humanity, and necessary because it was the best way to ensure consensus around the basic functioning principles of democracy. This also ensured the pairing of knowledge and politics: by rendering visible the normative (or political) commitments of knowledge claims, sociology of knowledge (as Reed shows) contributed to affirming the link between the epistemic and the political. As Agassi’s syllogism succinctly demonstrates, this link quickly morphed from signifying correlation (knowledge and power are related) to causation (the more knowledge, the more power), suggesting that epistemic democracy was if not a precursor, then certainly a correlate of liberal democracy.

This is why *Democratic Problem-Solving* cannot avoid running up against the issue of public intellectuals (*qua* epistemic police), and, obviously, their relationship to ‘Other minds’ (communities being policed). In the current political context, however, to the well-exercised questions Sassower raises such as—
should public intellectuals retain their Socratic gadfly motto and remain on the sidelines, or must they become more organically engaged (Gramsci 2011) in the political affairs of their local communities? Can some academics translate their intellectual capital into a socio-political one? Must they be outrageous or only witty when they do so? Do they see themselves as leaders or rather as critics of the leaders they find around them (149)?

—we might need to add the following: “And what if none of this matters?”

After all, differences in vocabularies of debate matter only if access to it depends on their convergence to a minimal common denominator. The problem for the guardians of public sphere today is not whom to include in these debates and how, but rather what to do when those ‘others’ refuse, metaphorically speaking, to share the same table. Populist right-wing politicians have at their disposal the wealth of ‘alternative’ outlets (Breitbart, Fox News, and increasingly, it seems, even the BBC), not to mention ‘fake news’ or the ubiquitous social media. The public sphere, in this sense, resembles less a (however cacophonous) town hall meeting than a series of disparate village tribunals. Of course, as Fraser (1990) noted, fragmentation of the public sphere has been inherent since its inception within the Western bourgeois liberal order.

The problem, however, is less what happens when other modes of arguing emerge and demand to be recognized, and more what happens when they aspire for redistribution of political power that threatens to overturn the very principles that gave rise to them in the first place. We are used to these terms denoting progressive politics, but there is little that prevents them from being appropriated for more problematic ideologies: after all, a substantial portion of the current conservative critique of the ‘culture of political correctness’, especially on campuses in the US, rests on the argument that ‘alternative’ political ideologies have been ‘repressed’, sometimes justifying this through appeals to the freedom of speech.

**Dialogic Knowledge**

In assuming a relatively benevolent reception of scientific knowledge, then, appeals such as Chis and Cruickshank’s to engage with different publics—whether as academics, intellectuals, workers, or activists—remain faithful to Popper’s normative ideal concerning the relationship between reasoning and decision-making: ‘the people’ would see the truth, if only we were allowed to explain it a bit better. Obviously, in arguing for dialogical, co-produced modes of knowledge, we are disavowing the assumption of a privileged position from which to do so; but, all too often, we let in through the back door the implicit assumption of the normative force of our arguments. It rarely, if ever, occurs to us that those we wish to persuade may have nothing to say to us, may be immune or impervious to our logic, or, worse, that we might not want to argue with them.

For if social studies of science taught us anything, it is that scientific knowledge is, among other things, a culture. An epistemic democracy of the Rortian type would mean that it’s a culture like any other, and thus not automatically entitled to a privileged status among other epistemic cultures, particularly not if its political correlates are weakened—or missing (cf. Hart 2016). Populist politics certainly has no use for critical slow dialogue, but it is
increasingly questionable whether it has use for dialogue at all (at the time of writing of this piece, in the period leading up to the 2017 UK General Election, the Prime Minister is refusing to debate the Leader of the Opposition). Sassower’s suggestion that neoliberalism exhibits a penchant for justification may hold a promise, but, as Cruickshank and Chis (among others) show on the example of UK higher education, ‘evidence’ can be adjusted to suit a number of policies, and political actors are all too happy to do that.

Does this mean that we should, as Steve Fuller suggested in another SERRC article (http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3nx) see in ‘post-truth’ the STS symmetry principle? I am skeptical. After all, judgments of validity are the privilege of those who can still exert a degree of control over access to the debate. In this context, I believe that questions of epistemic democracy, such as who has the right to make authoritative knowledge claims, in what context, and how, need to, at least temporarily, come second in relation to questions of liberal democracy. This is not to be teary-eyed about liberal democracy: if anything, my political positions lie closer to Cruickshank and Chis’ anarchism. But it is the only system that can—hopefully—be preserved without a massive cost in human lives, and perhaps repurposed so as to make them more bearable.

In this sense, I wish the essays in the volume confronted head-on questions such as whether we should defend epistemic democracy (and what versions of it) if its principles are mutually exclusive with liberal democracy, or, conversely, would we uphold liberal democracy if it threatened to suppress epistemic democracy. For the question of standards of public discourse is going to keep coming up, but it may decreasingly have the character of an academic debate, and increasingly concern the possibility to have one at all. This may turn out to be, so to speak, a problem that precedes all other problems. Essays in this volume have opened up important venues for thinking about it, and I look forward to seeing them discussed in the future.

Contact details: jb906@cam.ac.uk

References


