

Towards an Agentive Understanding of Political Silence

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Abstract:

The edited volume *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (2018) provides a fresh perspective on matters of voice and representation within the realm of International Relations. The publication's focus – silence – is commonly understood as the opposite of voice, and is therefore often interpreted negatively, as a lack of agency, or as the result of exclusion or oppression. Here, a central aim is to create a critical distance to this reductive understanding of silence, and instead to interpret it positively, emancipating it from its subsidiary position vis-à-vis the spoken word, as its own modality of political agency. Although not all individual contributions achieve this ambitious aim to the same extent, the volume generally presents a convincing argumentative direction in which silence is conceptualized not as exclusion from, but rather as constitutive of, political subjectivity. By approaching the concept from different disciplinary groundings, and working from a variety of historical and contemporary case studies, the contributors invite their readers to consider silence as a force of political change.

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Abstract:

The edited volume *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (2018) provides a fresh perspective on matters of voice and representation within the realm of International Relations. The publication's focus – silence – is commonly understood as the opposite of voice, and is therefore often interpreted negatively, as a lack of agency, or as the result of exclusion or oppression. Here, a central aim is to create a critical distance to this reductive understanding of silence, and instead to interpret it positively, emancipating it from its subsidiary position vis-à-vis the spoken word, as its own modality of political agency. Although not all individual contributions achieve this ambitious aim to the same extent, the volume generally presents a convincing argumentative direction in which silence is conceptualized not as exclusion from, but rather as constitutive of, political subjectivity. By approaching the concept from different disciplinary groundings, and working from a variety of historical and contemporary case studies, the contributors invite their readers to consider silence as a force of political change.

The edited volume *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (2018) provides a fresh perspective on matters of voice and representation within the realm of International Relations and its various political, legal, and socio-cultural applications. In much political theory, central emphasis is placed upon the voice, either in its literal capacity or in one of its metaphorical implications (e.g. voting, unions), as the quintessential realization of political agency. Within this context, silence is commonly understood as voice's opposite, and therefore interpreted negatively, as a form of "lack, absence, or even as the end of politics, power, and agency" (p. 1). Sophia Dingli and Thomas N. Cooke's volume describes a departure from this reductive tendency, and a shift towards interpreting silence productively, as a multi-faceted phenomenon that can "enable, open and mobilize power and agency" (ibid.).

The individual chapters often take prominent poststructuralist thinkers as their point of departure, such as Gayatri Spivak, whose question “Can the subaltern speak?” has become a catalyst for the representation of the oppressed as voiceless subjects. Spivak does offer an empowering counter-interpretation of silence as a potential space for resistance (cf. “we have to learn to work together in silence”, quoted on p. 69). She shares this understanding of silence-as-resistance with other poststructuralists, such as Michel Foucault, who argues that “silence and secret are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions, but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (quoted on pp. 100-101). In other words, silence is often understood to be in a binary relationship with discourse, where silence is seen either as a violent exclusion *from* discourse, or as a reactionary form of resistance *against* it, i.e. “as an expression of individualism/autonomy, of resistance and of escape from a higher authority” (p. 65). Taking a critical stance toward this binary understanding, *Political Silence* is aimed rather at articulating the concept “within a positive, normative framework”, thereby emancipating it from its subordinate position, in order to theorize it as “a *productive* modality of agency” (i; italics in original).

The contributors approach this central aim using a great variety of case studies and disciplinary groundings. Several of the chapters contextualize silence within political debates that range, to name only two, from the practice of collective memory (Faye Donnelle’s chapter, pp. 78-95), to questions of global ecological crises (Karl Petschke’s chapter, pp. 129-45). Other chapters instead take a primarily theoretical approach to the concept, such as Noé Cornago (pp. 41-61), who conceptualizes silence not as sound’s opposite, but rather as sharing with it a metonymical relationship within the same “common experiential domain” (p. 43). Sound and silence, to him, can only be understood in relation to one another, and whether something is understood as the one or the other is dependent upon context. Similarly, A.T. Kingsmith (pp. 112-28) discusses silence within the contexts of speech-act theory and related philosophies of language and communication, conceptualizing the phenomenon not as a condition, but as a form of action that demands response. His chapter is not concerned with what silence *is*, but rather with what it *does*.

At times, the volume’s general argumentative direction seems to linger at the interpretation of silence as a form of listening (e.g. David Joseph Wellman’s chapter about Compassionate Listening, pp. 162-78). Although it is constructive to see silence not as the result of oppressive ‘silencing,’ but as the agentive act of withholding one’s own voice in order to make space for those of others, this approach theorizes silence as a step towards improved communication. As such, this approach still sees silence as standing in the service of the word, and therefore does not entirely fulfill the editors’ aforementioned promise of emancipating the concept from its subsidiary position vis-à-vis voice or speech as the penultimate realizations of political agency.

At its best, however, the volume makes important steps away from the tendency to prioritize the spoken word above other, non-verbal expressions of agency. This tendency is what Sophia Dingli and Sameera Khalfeey identify in their chapter as the “logocentric conceptualization of legitimacy in much of modern political theory” (p. 62), that is, the common overestimation of language as the central medium of political self-determination. In this and several other contributions, therefore, silence is re-conceptualized as the opposite not of sound, but of logos, of the word. This shift allows an understanding of silence not against, but in accord with, non-verbal aural concepts such as sound and noise: e.g. Cooke’s chapter about noise and silence concerning matters of Big Data and privacy (pp. 20-40). This approach to silence complicates its common reductionist interpretation as an absence (of speech, and therefore of self-determination), and instead opens it up as an umbrella term for forms of agency that escape discourse and linguistic representation: “Silence [...] is an opening. New modalities for political (re)configuration, (re)collectivism, and (re)deployment are rendered possible *through* the uncertainty and ambiguity rendered by the silences observed in each chapter” (p. 15; italics in original).

Because of the volume’s overall coherence, which is due in no small part to Robert Latham’s strong concluding chapter (pp. 179-94) in which he ties all previous chapters together in a comprehensive way, it offers an exciting new perspective on silence as a space of productive ambiguity, where power is not as fixed or determined as it is in structures that are governed by the word. Although acknowledging at regular intervals that political silence can often indeed be the result of violence and oppression, a majority of the volume’s contributors demonstrate in their case studies that the development of a political voice is not always the solution to marginalization. In such cases, silence can be the most effective way to retain or strengthen one’s agency. Readers of *Political Silence* are invited to search for forms of agency and empowerment that are sustained and developed beyond the reach of representation’s main instruments of voice and language, in the ambiguity, the not-quite, and the not-yet of silence.

German Abstract:

Eine Neubewertung politischen Schweigens als Handlungsoption

Der Sammelband *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (2018) bietet eine neue Perspektive auf Fragen der Stimme und Repräsentation im Bereich der Internationalen Beziehungen. In vielen politischen Theorien steht die Stimme als die Quintessenz der politischen Entscheidungsfreiheit im Mittelpunkt. Das Schweigen wird häufig als das Gegenteil der Stimme verstanden und wird daher häufig negativ interpretiert, als mangelnde Entscheidungsfreiheit oder als Folge von Ausgrenzung, Gewalt oder Unterdrückung. Ein zentrales Ziel dieses Buches ist es, eine kritische Distanz zu diesem reduzierenden Verständnis von Stille zu schaffen, statt es positiv zu interpretieren und es von seiner untergeordneten Position gegenüber dem gesprochenen Wort als seiner eigenen Form politischer Handlungsfähigkeit zu emanzipieren. Obwohl nicht alle Einzelbeiträge dieses ehrgeizige Ziel in gleichem Maße erreichen, weist der Band im Allgemeinen eine kohärente und überzeugende argumentative Richtung auf, in der Stille nicht als Ausschluss von politischer Subjektivität, sondern als konstitutiv dafür verstanden wird. Durch die Annäherung an das Konzept aus einer Vielzahl disziplinärer Grundlagen und anhand zahlreicher historischer und zeitgenössischer Fallstudien fordern die Beitragenden ihre Leser_innen auf, das Potenzial des Schweigens als eine Kraft des politischen Wandels zu betrachten.

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