

Book Review

Stephen D'Arcy

Languages of the Unheard: Why Militant Protest Is Good for Democracy

Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It was, perhaps, hyperbole, but in the giddy atmosphere of a successful insurrection and not long before the world's first new nation had ratified its constitution, its most eloquent advocate wrote to William Stephens Smith, an American diplomat on November 13, 1787 as follows:

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.

Times and opinions change. Now, the many liberal democracies are less willing to imagine the need for insurrection and eager instead to repress it. The fact that there are people who think of *them* as tyrants is barely comprehensible. They regard themselves as above reproach and dismiss those who argue against them as “tyrants” and “terrorists.”

It had been almost two hundred years since the American Revolution when social scientists pronounced the American experiment to be an unmitigated success. In one of the signature books of the era, William Kornhauser addressed the question of democracy in *The Politics of Mass Society* (1959). In it he safely concluded that poverty was no longer a problem. Prosperity, though inconsistent and occasionally unfairly distributed, was nonetheless growing and broadening. It would not take long for Michael Harrington (1962) to publish his ground-breaking book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* which, in turn, became an important prompt for Lyndon Johnson's much praised “War of Poverty”—a war that was lost in the jungles of Vietnam.

Tyranny at home was also no longer deemed a problem, for Kornhauser and other “pluralists” confidently announced that any vestige of “ruling class” had been supplanted by a series of circulating elites, none of which held absolute power and all of which represented different sectoral interests. This illusion was soon shaken by people such as Henry S. Kariel's *The Decline of American Pluralism* (1961) and G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* (1967), now in its seventh edition and newly subtitled *The Triumph of the Corporate Rich*, revealed something akin to the truth about power in the USA. For the pluralists, however, the belief remained firm that no one was permanently excluded in the continuing political game that authoritatively allocated values and in which government acted as an unbiased referee in sorting out the question of who gets what, why and how. Social class was effectively neutralized as a source of conflict as race and gender did not even merit a mention. “Marx,” Kornhauser stated flatly, “was wrong” (p. 232).

This was not to say that its boosters thought that the United States was, as Seymour Martin Lipset (1960: 403) would say just a year later, “the good society in operation”; there were indeed social problems, but they were social or, more often, psychological in nature—not political and certainly not economic. Oddly, Kornhauser focused on *alienation*, one of Marx’s core concepts to build his case against Marx, but he defined it so narrowly that it lost its explanatory power. Instead, he relied on the idea that what really troubled America was the result of the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of the atomized individual. The security of identity so easily found in traditional society had to be replaced with a new sense of community. Apathy, alienation and anomie were important problems, but Kornhauser was convinced that “mass society” and the risk of “mass movements” was a by-product of the transition from feudalism to modernity. It would be overcome.

The subjects of *Languages of the Unheard* ... include the Red Army Faction, the Los Angeles rioters, the Zapatistas, the Mohawk Warrior Society, the Black Bloc, the Québec student strikers, the “Occupy” movement. ... Stephen D’Arcy takes political militancy ... seriously.

In the intervening half century, the irrelevance of pluralist analysis has become clear. Decisive and divisive economic, political and ethical issues are palpable. High technology, which was once thought to be a problem only insofar as increasingly affluent North Americans would have trouble figuring out what to do in their ample spare time, now presents a much bigger and very much different set of concerns.

So it is that a hint of Jeffersonian rhetoric has returned, not just to the United States of America, but to other liberal democracies where growing prosperity is no longer as evident and “leisure time” is just code for unemployment.

Enter Stephen D’Arcy, a professor of philosophy in a small liberal arts college with a strong tradition in theology. Huron University College predates the recently rebranded Western University (formerly the University of Western Ontario in London) and is its oldest affiliated college. Professor D’Arcy teaches mainly undergraduates and offers them courses in fields such as Ethics and Eastern Religions. He possesses a methodical mind. He is good at logic. He seems outwardly to be an unlikely commentator on matters such as the necessity of spilling blood to refresh liberty trees. Looks can deceive.

In the United States, Canada, the more flourishing parts of Europe and elsewhere in the developed world, there is no lack of arrogance and condescension among the rich and their political enablers. The smug and supercilious, the pompous and patronizing are a continuing presence; but, so are the lean and the hungry, the angry and defiant, the inchoate insurrectionists with cell phones and a passion for what they choose to call social justice and a sustainable environment.

Stephen D’Arcy has written a handbook. It is available to all—police forces and protesters alike. It would be of use to both, but the instruments of law and order will probably ignore it. I hope their putative opponents do not.

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Stephen D’Arcy’s book does not explain how to make a Molotov cocktail or organize a terrorist cell (neither is very hard to do for anyone with a modicum of wit and a sufficient will). Instead, he does what he presumably does best: he writes methodically about logic and ethics as applied to people whom we rarely regard as being proper subjects for such analysis or, indeed, self-reflection.

The subjects of *Languages of the Unheard* are plainly listed on the back cover blurb: they include the Red Army Faction, the Los Angeles rioters, the Zapatistas, the Mohawk Warrior Society, the Black Bloc, the Québec student strikers, the “Occupy” movement. The topics include Civil Disobedience, Direct Action, Sabotage, Rioting and Armed Resistance to authority.

Stephen D’Arcy writes with meticulous care and also with passion. There’s little difficulty assessing which “side” he is on. Though armed and uniformed public safety officers and “Big Data Analysts” would probably disagree, D’Arcy is on the side of “democracy” or what Jefferson called “liberty.” And he wants to make sure that the *militants*, for whom he displays tremendous and generous empathy, get it right.

This book is a modest triumph. It may not go down in the history of revolutionary thought (at least partly because it is not “revolutionary”); but, it should find an honoured place in the small library of serious books about what to do in a world so plainly dominated by horror and hypocrisy. Stephen D’Arcy takes political militants and militancy seriously. He does not demean old leftists, new leftists or even anarchists. He does not lay the “blame” for their sometimes uncivil demeanor on some mental disease or disorder; he properly understands that the reason for people going into the streets to express their rage has more to do with the authorities who supervise social oppression than to personalities of the people who protects. But ... and this is a “but” that opens *Languages of the Unheard* to anyone who genuinely wants to know what’s going on ... he understands that the moral outrage of those aghast at displays of disorder and the moral outrage of those who no longer countenance blatant injustice are both stuck in a dilemma. The fact is that *nothing* is as simple as it seems. The seemingly clear choices about what to think and what to do are inherently ambiguous.

Anyone who wishes to think *through* the issues of militant protest would do well to buy this book. Stephen D’Arcy knows whereof he speaks, and he speaks in a calm and deliberate manner about matters that seldom are approached with composure and informed reason. A thoughtful law enforcement official could read this book and begin to

grasp the mentality of those now easily labeled “hooligans.” A protest organizer could read this book and gain maturity and insight that may both strengthen and season her resolve. Both, however, should come away with a greater level of self-awareness and a greater appreciation for subtlety. If that happens, Stephen D’Arcy will have further fulfilled his vocation as an educator.

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