

Strategies of Civility and Incivility

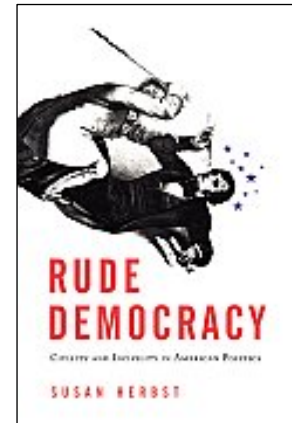
Susan Herbst, **Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics**, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010, 203 pp., \$22.17 (hardcover).

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On September 9, 2009, the President of the United States addressed a joint session of Congress on the issue of health care. The speech followed a long national debate over reforming a system with rising costs, declining coverage, and suboptimal outcomes. As is customary, U.S. presidents address Congress annually to report on the state of the union. They also gather the Congress in times of national crisis. At least since the Reagan administration, these nationally televised addresses allow audiences to view party divisions. Politicians sit in different groups. Members of the president's party jump up and applaud during his speech, while those out of power remain seated, usually with crossed arms. Hissing and booing are not uncommon. Barack Obama's health care address was greeted with the usual partisan jostling. Skeptical



laughter surged from the Republicans when he reported that policy details have yet to be worked out. In the middle of the speech, Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina shouted for the country to hear: "You lie!" The challenge turned out to be factually incorrect, and Wilson offered a half-hearted apology shortly afterward. Norman Ornstein reported that Wilson's outburst "really does tell you how low we've sunk when it comes to common courtesy" (Friedman, 2009, para. 2). Unfortunately, virulent partisan displays in Congress are not uncommon, but according to Norman Ornstein "yelling in the middle of a speech 'you lie,' that's something different" (ibid., para. 3). With conflict animating presidential campaigns, the question arises: How low can politics go?

Susan Herbst's *Rude Democracy* urges that the uncivil exchanges characterizing much of the American public sphere move on from being the object of hand-wringing to become a focus of critical, mixed-methods analysis. Civility is an issue that crosses scholarly and public concern, particularly as university experts consult with campaigns, engage in advocacy, and theorize the public sphere. The tools to examine critical cases, Herbst contends, are yet to be fully crafted. This is particularly the case in an era in which rude politics appears to set a low bar for public debate—and then moves it ever downward. Further, she points out that civility needs rethinking because the Internet offers digital spaces to preserve and make accessible public address, blog opinions with followings, and open spaces for interactive engagement. Present appraisals of civility exist either at the philosophical end where civility is defined in an idealistic way, or at the empirical, one which demands analysis of effects on public opinion. Ethics falls short because definitions of civility would find the public sphere always lacking. Empirical methods that measure the complex, interactive effects of uncivil acts, on the other hand, have yet to be developed. Moreover, such measurements of public opinion are especially difficult when main stream media overlaps

in public controversies with new media supplements. Critical analysis investigates why it is that, sometimes, bad manners make for good politics, and why responsible leaders take up policy debate only to generate more heat than light.

Professor Herbst develops a middle ground for mixed-method studies of civility. Key to opening this perspective is a redefinition of civility as strategic politics. Civility is a quality of the situated discourse employed in a political exchange within the traditions of a democratic public culture. Civility and incivility, she writes, are "strategic assets used by those pursuing specific interests, whether humanitarian efforts or far less admirable ones" (p. 124). The strategic elements of civility require nuanced interpretation of how discourses that connect emotional display with personal attack attract attention, fuel a style of speaking, and set off a discourse dynamics. *Rude Democracy* works this out by exposing and filling the gap between traditional public opinion research and philosophical analysis of deliberative democracy. Her analysis focuses on why and how partisan identity becomes invested in events staged by campaigns, spurred by national debates, exploited by parties, and expanded by the framing and leverage of traditional and new media.

The book devotes attention to two speakers whose unusual styles model civility for 21st-century American public debate: Sarah Palin and Barack Obama. The choices are well-selected as each politician has a notable style and occupies a conflicted space in the American culture of civic address: Palin is the first female Republican vice-presidential candidate, and Obama is the first African-American president. Herbst's excellent chapters set out to analyze the mysterious dynamics of popularity and controversy brought about by each of the two.

The question of women's advocacy and the public sphere has an unsettling history in the United States for many. The right to vote was not won easily or quickly, and in some fora, a woman speaking in public remains especially challenging still. Sarah Palin is an interesting case. As Herbst points out, her candidacy raises questions of populist outrage, and her style, the mystery of political courtship. In 1957, Elia Kazan raised the specter of televised populism in *A Face in the Crowd*. Lonesome Rhodes, an Arkansas hobo and guitar picker, uses his toothy smile and winning ways to feed an appetite for products and politics by courting feminized audiences. Politics and product, it was all the same. Sarah Palin offers a 21st-century model of this equation, but as reality, not fiction. She is a politician, who as Herbst points out, rallies male audiences by rousing a mixture of passion and incivility. Herbst is successful in identifying the ways civility and incivility both draw the media and, at the same time, leave Palin herself a popular, somewhat mysterious figure, a maverick center in the hub of populism in the United States. *Rude Democracy* is a fascinating and needed study of the dynamics of feminist populist campaigning.

Barack Obama also invites a complex study in civility. Herbst examines the dilemmas of the speaker himself, who, when invited to the Notre Dame campus, had to make the case for listening for keeping an open mind on one of the most divisive issues in the United States, abortion. Civility in this address is rooted in conscience, the openness to reflect and make tough choices, and respect for all who end up in such a situation. The address and analysis reminds us of one of Governor Cuomo's speech on abortion, where civility was ultimately appealed on the grounds of conscience (Farrell, 1992).

There is another side to Obama's strategic dilemmas-). Just as Palin has to deal with incivility on the part of the press and politicians, so, too, the President has to contend with the calculated language of disrespect. Herbst extends her analysis to the President's role in the important national health care debate. Here, she discovers efforts of the Right to appropriate the insights of praxis popularized by the Left. Theatrical moments of confrontation are coached over the Web in an effort to effectively disrupt deliberations and intimidate politicians from engaging in public address. Herbst points out that what underwrites this strategy is the Internet which provides a space of practice and a place to post techniques of civil disturbance. Incivility builds on itself. The ugly language of political punditry becomes even coarser assertions on the Internet, particularly among fringe groups. When incivility becomes a standard fare, public debate suffers. Democracy becomes less able to undertake public deliberation and it becomes costly even to articulate a language of public address.

Herbst moves through these cases to the question of how the strategies of civility should be studied and taught on campus, so as to train the future generation of citizens in civil practices of politics. A survey was conducted from a large sampling Georgia college students, and results are discussed. What are the expectations of the costs of involvement in public argument? What degree of comfort do students have with give and take of opinion among themselves and with faculty at school? The results are mixed. On the one hand, students recognize the importance of argument, but resist expressing criticism. Herbst translates the results of her survey into recommendations for including, within the university experience, access to a culture of argument (Zaresky, 2009, pp. 296–308). Among the elements needed to foster such a culture is growth in students' capacities to engage in hard listening, respectful difference, and informed advocacy. Such a culture would be particularly helpful to disciplines that prepare their students for public engagement, such as journalism, political science, international relations and communication. The sciences as well may benefit by developing systematic training in the informed practices of public argument, I would add. In the end, Professor Herbst's volume is one of those rare works that should spur rethinking of crucial democratic concepts, civility, and partisanship, while displaying a model of such work through the grounded and insightful studies of Palin and Obama. The work also moves beyond the horizons of criticism to measure the tasks ahead in developing a culture of argument that welcomes a generation born of America at war and in the midst of the Great Recession. Civility and incivility constitute the strategic assets and costs of public deliberation.

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