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In These Troubled Times of Public Discourse, is There Still a Place for Dialogue?

By Bruce Janz
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Carl von Clausewitz, the great theorist of war, said: “War is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.” What he meant was that even in the time of war, there are other kinds of dialogue happening, and war is not an act that happens because of the failure of dialogue, but is just another component in it.

This thought raises a central question in these troubled times of public discourse. Is there still a place for dialogue, and if so, what is it?

In the democratic foundations of the nation, dialogue is essential to bringing about the goal of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

The entire structure of government is an exercise in dialogue – it is why there are checks and balances. The assurance of freedom of speech and of the press, the limitations on government power over citizens – it is all meant so that we can address the problems of the nation by using reasoned discourse rather than violence.

But what if dialogue itself becomes war by other means?

We often have an optimistic view of dialogue, which is that well-meaning people come together and work out their problems through understanding and compromise.

But dialogue can, of course, be many other things. It can be used to forestall action on a problem; we can indefinitely talk about something rather than acting on it. It can be used to placate someone, to “keep them talking,” while proceeding with a controversial action. Powerful parties in a dialogue can define the terms and assumptions of that dialogue, making it more restricted, or more abstract, or less historically aware than others might want it to be. Dialogue can be used to make a position seem completely rational, when in fact its limits are just not immediately apparent.

And, dialogue can be weaponized. That’s my term for the use of dialogue to further stigmatize or marginalize a person or group.

I don’t mean by this that the content of the dialogue is used in this manner – disagreement in itself is not the weaponization of dialogue. I’m referring to the form of

the dialogue, and the ways in which what looks like dialogue can actually undermine any real communication or understanding (and, in fact, is specifically constructed to do so).

So, for instance, in many online discussion boards there are trolls whose purpose is ostensibly to engage in dialogue but is really to disrupt dialogue to make sure it doesn't happen. It is a violation of one of the assumptions of dialogue, which is that dialogue partners have a similar goal: to arrive at truth or coordinate action.

When some people in a dialogue have weaponized it, it doesn't help to just reassert the value of dialogue or insist on its basic starting-points. If an exchange of words was never about arriving at truth, then presenting facts or pointing out lapses in logic won't help.

The point of weaponized dialogue, as the anonymous online bulletin board 4chan would put it, is all about the lulz, that is, all about the amusement of seeing people who still believe that dialogue gets us somewhere, flail around and get all worked up.

Weaponized dialogue is dangerous precisely because it is war by other means, and not in the sense that Clausewitz meant. It is not just a parallel track to other, more rational ways of making a political point. It is the belief that it is no longer possible to make political points because they will all be loaded in favor of the "enemy," whoever that is. It is the abandonment of the public sphere while holding onto the illusion that such a sphere still exists.

Do we, then, just live in an anarchy at this point, where even if we get the facts right the dialogue to which they are supposed to contribute is so tainted that it is all but useless? Is dialogue just another weapon to advance the goals of my team over yours?

I don't think so, but we will have to put aside our rose-colored glasses about what dialogue can actually accomplish.

Dialogue itself, as a form of reason, needs as much attention as the arguments we make within a dialogue. We know a lot about logical fallacies, biases and other ways in which positions within a dialogue can fail, but we spend little time thinking about dialogue itself and how it is shaping or warping our ability to construct the society we want (as if, indeed, there even is a society that "we" together might agree on).

Dialogue is not gone, and it is not irrevocably tainted, but without care it can serve to deepen divisions rather than heal them.

So, does dialogue still matter for you? What kind of dialogue – real dialogue – do you actually want? And what are you willing to do to make it happen?

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