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Review of Listening for Democracy – Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation by Andrew Dobson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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Abstract

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Author Biography

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Keywords

Listening, democracy

In 2012, I attended an international journalism conference in Durban South Africa¹. Per chance, as often is the case at conferences like these, I found myself at a session where Tanja Dreher² convincingly spoke about the obligation to move the onus from marginalized groups to have a voice, to responsibility on the side of mainstream journalists to listen in a different way in order to mediate an inclusive register of voices in the democratic public sphere. This session shifted my own academic interest in deliberative democracy from what democratic talking looks like to what listening looks like in democracy. To distinguish between notions of therapeutic listening and democratic listening, Susan Bickford's notions of 'political' and 'active' listening in *Dissonance of Democracy* (1996) were, and remain, important signposts suggested by Dreher.

Dobson's book is a welcome addition to the relatively small, but growing, literature focusing on the role of listening in democratic processes in democratic and political theory. Dobson starts from a seemingly simple proposition – that we do not pay enough attention to listening as a skill in democratic conversation – to explore the role listening plays in democracy, and how listening might become more explicitly a central to democratic processes. Dobson departs from a definition of democracy “founded on the autonomy of individuals” (p. 3), who abdicate the law-making process to their representatives in parliament. Once we have abdicated the responsibility of law making to representatives the ‘mechanics of responsiveness become extremely important’ (p. 3). Listening, argues Dobson, is an unacknowledged, and crucial component in the “mechanics of responsiveness” (p. 6). More attention to listening can “breathe life into the democratic project” (p. 6) and help realize its objectives.

Dobson systematically outlines his premise of listening for democracy in six chapters. In the first chapter, Dobson locates listening within democratic theory, asking why listening has not received the warranted attention as a “political-theoretical” (p. 18) concept. Chapter 2 focuses on other fields from which to draw on in learning about listening: education, medicine, media and communication, and, to some extent, business and consumer relations. Dobson points out how theorists and practitioners in these fields reflect on what good listening looks like, and how these insights could be used to reflect more concretely on listening as a democratic practice. In chapter 3, Dobson returns to listening and democracy by examining listening as a pathway to democratic legitimacy, and as a way of undermining disaffection and mistrust in the political system. Chapter 4 – perhaps the most relevant to the audience of this journal – explores listening in terms of deliberative and dialogic democracy.

¹ <https://iamcr.org/iamcr-2012-programme-online>

² Dreher, Tanya. 2009. "Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice." *Continuum* 23 (4):445-458; Dreher, Tanja. 2010. "Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening." *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (1):85-103.

Here Dobson argues that while deliberative democracy has made “strenuous efforts” (p. 109) to interrogate the theory and practice of dialogue and conversation in democracy, the field falls short in its attention to the practice of listening. I will return to some of Dobson’s insights in this chapter. Who do we listen to, and what do we listen for, are the questions posed in chapter 5. Here Dobson turns his focus away from aural listening to examine listening as a form of recognition: as affirmation and transformation. In the final chapter, Dobson examines institutionalized, or institutionalizing listening through the lens of three types of “political relationships” (p. 170): face to face relationship between individual politicians with constituents, politicians with other politicians, and institutions of government and the members of the communities these institutions represent.

It is especially in deliberative democratic theory – the focus of chapter four – where Dobson finds “the listening cupboard very bare indeed” (p. 110) of theoretical conception. Assuming that it is in this field where most of the hard work have gone into the nature of dialogue and conversation in democracy, Dobson finds this vacuum in terms of listening surprising. Drawing from Habermas – “the source of inspiration for deliberative democrats” (p. 112) – and others³ Dobson offers his concept of “dialogic democracy” in additions to deliberative democracy bearing a focus on physical presence, the “uniqueness of the interlocutors”, trust, and recognition in deliberation. In this chapter, Dobson also elaborates his distinction between listening *to*, and listening *for*:

In a deliberative situation in which points of view are being measured in terms of the force of the ‘better argument’ it seems obvious that there is a premium on listening carefully to the arguments being put forward. If participants in deliberation are to weigh up arguments carefully they obviously need to be listening to each other and to expert witnesses (if there are any). This is listening *to*. In addition, most accounts of deliberative democracy aim to be inclusive of points of view as well as fair between them, and this amounts to listening *for* voices that may previously have gone unheard. Given that fair deliberation and fairness of inclusion are central to deliberative democracy, and that listening is a fundamental feature of them both, one might have expected some attention to have been paid to it (p. 110).

Dobson makes a number of suggestions for empirical work that could follow from his observations in the book. For example, he acknowledges the challenge

³ Antony Giddens Antony (1994). *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Charles Tilly (2005). *Trust and Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Iris Marion Young (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

posed by Dreher that we require new ways for ensuring that the *center* listens, rather than simply requiring the marginalized to speak up. Dobson suggests that more empirical work is needed to offer a ‘normative account of why those at the centre *should* listen to the periphery’, and to map out ways in which these normative claims can be made good in practice.

Because the field of listening, and in particular the field of listening in democracy, is relatively unexplored Dobson’s vibrant exchange with the work of scholars and theorists in the field of democratic and political, as well as other disciplines is valuable. Reading the chapters feels like being part of a conversation – one that is easy to follow, yet challenging in its propositions for re-thinking old concepts. It is a welcome and important addition to a listening cupboard that is starting to fill up.