



Comments on Eliasoph's *Avoiding Politics*

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Eliasoph's work has developed in an interesting direction. I would like to start by returning to the book in order to see how she arrived at what she is saying now, and what it is she is looking for.

First, I want to state that the book is misread. Eliasoph does not say that people don't talk (except, perhaps, her groups of dancers). She is interested in HOW they talk, and in how they talk in different arenas. The misunderstanding may be partly her own fault for giving the title she has to the book. But it's wrong to represent it as if it claims that Americans do not talk about politics.

Let me start by what I understand Eliasoph is looking for, and then to continue in her direction, and point to other situations where political talk goes on, drawing on my own study and experience in another country, and, last, to point to the way in which politics is discussed by politicians, and by media journalists – in order to see to see how far the issue stretches beyond ordinary people to the deterioration of political talk in the two countries, as traditional definitions of political talk have changed altogether..

1. A question about sampling: how do we know that these groups are representative?

(Berkeley is last place one would think of for not talking politics)

And if you compare data from ethnography and survey: (1) Wyatt's survey shows strong minority does talk politics – though there is the question of where (home would favor Eliasoph); (2) Wyatt says "Don't ask people about 'talk politics,' ask about specific areas/issues. What would Eliasoph's respondents say to the survey? Activists, cynics, even volunteers, would say 'yes, we talk politics.' From this it follows that Eliasoph means something else by (a) politics, (b) apathy, (c) role of citizen participation

2. What bothers Eliasoph? she worries about the way in which people talk about politics:

(1) **unwillingness/avoidance of volunteers to conceptualize** (on the level of the relationship between structural failures within institutions (say, schools) and the problems which cause the need to volunteer (to which they contribute as volunteers by giving, say, an hour of their time a day...);

(2) **unwillingness of activists to appear as citizens** instead of as “moms” (it’s not the ecological risk’s to the town’s environment which moves them, it’s that “I can’t see my daughter suffering”). Both groups would rather not conceptualize their problems at a more sociological level;

(3) **unwillingness of cynics to face possibility that they CAN have influence** on change.

All the evidence is leading to (and rising from) the notion that participatory democracy is desirable and that we need better participation.

3. Why don’t they talk like Eliasoph expects them to? This differs among groups:

(1) **“Buffaloes”** don’t want institutional identities – religion, job, neighborhood; politics “pollute;” you ought to be “yourself” in order to emerge as a social person. (Different context from that of volunteers or activists; there “public role” is part of the definition!), except that they do seem to voice their identity in terms of RACE and GENDER.

(2) **Cynics** talk politics but think system is not only inaccessible but against them; does not have the interest of the people at heart; but these do talk, says Eliasoph, albeit from an amused distance. Politics is discussed as derisive joke (although you could argue that buffaloes’ anti p.c. racist jokes do the same).

Also, the label “Cynics” is not on the same continuum as the rest, as they are defined by their style of discourse rather than by the institutional setting; (could they be the more sophisticated buffaloes?) And, there is anyway not much difference between Buffaloes and Cynics since neither cares about the system.

(3) Volunteers talk politics but don’t talk Big. They seem to sense that it is ineffective for their job. Big talk may undermine the utility of what they are doing. As part of a group, people may feel that argument/politics undermines cohesiveness, and the group may lose the unity it need for doing the job. Sophisticated arguments may alienate some people who may feel insecure to begin with.

(4) Activists talk a lot but disguise their identities as moms. Activists differ from volunteers in that they talk to each other. Here there is a need to distinguish between internal talk and external talk. Eliasoph may be discounting internal talk as does Schudson (who defines political talk in terms of talking to opponents). Katz believes that there IS a function to people talking politics to people who think like them (in clarifying, cohesion, perhaps conquering reluctance to speak ‘outside” for fear of being ostracized (Noelle-Neuman’s multiple ignorance). And of course, you can have the bitterest fights among people who think like you. (Take the recurrent agonizing of left wing parties in Israel whether to join a rightwing government, and maneuver it toward making peace from within, or whether to bring to its downfall as fighting opposition in Parliament).

But activists need most CARE in talking out in order not to alienate, hopefully to mobilize, the general public and the institutions in charge to their cause. It may also be that the media are at fault in teaching “momism.” In that case, “talking as mom” EXTERNALLY can be labeled as successful strategy rather than as reluctance to talk politics. This is similar to the case of the volunteers, who cannot afford such talk INTERNALLY. For both it is functional.

To conclude, the key distinctions in talking politics according to Eliasoph -- the relationship between talk/action within a group, and between talk/action outside the group -- should not get lost.

4. Eliasoph's distinction between "on stage" and "backstage." Eliasoph bases her argument that people don't talk politics on the evidence she has that her people have opinions and CAN talk "real" politics. "Backstage" -- that is, to her in private, in her therapist's role, they do talk the way she would like them to talk "on stage." Take the example of members in the Buffalos' group, who, Eliasoph tells us, participate in racist jokes with the friends they meet regularly but profess to her privately they don't "really" like these jokes. The problem with this assumption is that while no doubt that 'Within the group' constitutes one context, and 'With Eliasoph constitutes another; it is less self-evident that, from the respondents' perspectives, talking to Eliasoph is "backstage," or, in other words, that what they tell HER is what they "really" think. After all, she represents an outsider, sent from academia, which they surely interpret in terms of certain expectations (just as they do in their own group). If one goes by Goffman, then the confidence of "not liking" the racist or sexist jokes can be interpreted not necessarily as "more real" but as "more adequate" to a conversation with Eliasoph (which it clearly is). Once one plays the "context" game one cannot leave oneself out...And if they really didn't like the style of their buddies, how come they didn't change their circle of friends? So there is room to question the "authenticity" of their more p.c. reactions away from the group.

5. Finding a place in which genuine political conversation goes on. Eliasoph is still looking for a place in which people talk politics, where it is more honest, less constrained. What she is doing now is a development of what she has done in Avoiding Politics. She has

found a better place, though not perfect, for political talk. It the situation of contact between professionals in the educational system, working within a bureaucracy, who share a common interest with parents. . Here conversation is not private but “semi public,” and unlike among the volunteers and activists, nobody is hiding. Here the everyday conversation may slide into something bigger, and turn into a discussion of values, of how to repair injustice. People do discuss principles, not in single-issue contexts, and not constrained by a specific task at hand, or by the need to talk strategically in order to achieve their aims.

If it is true, and these kind of conversations do take place in these settings, the question that has to be asked is how do these conversations aggregate into public opinion which has some bearing in the world?

What Eliasoph seems to have done is to move one step back from public associations to a possible breeding ground for such associations. Places like universities, jails, churches, baby clinics are all “Safe places” (as called by William Gamson) for such talk. But if and when they do develop into an social action group -- why do they then look like the activist groups that Eliasoph had talked to earlier? Why can't they keep the language of everyday talk, concerned with morals, with values, with injustice? Because here we (or Eliasoph) find ourselves in a double bind: You can have a real conversation about making the world a better place, but give up on the idea of having political power; but once you have become a lobby for trying to apply some of your ideas, you have to think strategically. Remember, the perception of good citizenship of the activists does not allow them to talk outside in the way they talk among themselves because it gets in the way of winning. Politics is by nature bargaining, and reaching a compromise, that is, having to give up on some principles.

6. But let's continue this line of thought and think of other situations in which political conversations take place, and when do they have an impact – on the public or on government?

(1) Over crisis -- a major political failure (The Davidians, the hostages in Iran, Monica), or an event like the school shootings, or the Rodney King, or, in Israel, Prime Minister Rabin's assassination -- events which brings to the surface inherent ills, or threats lurking in the system -- trigger discussion;

(2) Around Media Events (sometimes the “closure” of crisis, and other times, transformative events on their own right) – the first landing on the moon, Begin, Sadat and Carter's signing the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and Rabin and Arafat signing the Oslo agreement between Israel and the Palestinians;

(3) Around open texts – what Tuchman calls DEVELOPING news – ongoing, unfinished, business, which can be interpreted in different ways (for example, the congressional hearings of the Hill/Thomas affair which brought to reconsidering what constitutes sexual harassment”). Hallin and Mancini find cultural differences between the US and Italy in the way news stories are presented. News stories in Italy were found to have a more open construction than their American equivalents, and, therefore, invite more political talk.

(4) In a liminal situation – such as e-mail, or “therapeutic” encounter with interviewer, with various degrees of anonymity. Again, different cultures provide a range of such situations. In Israel, a typical liminal situation occurs during men's annual (up to 30 days) period in as reservists in the Israeli military (with others they know only in this setting, and don't meet in the rest of their lives), or the 3 years of obligatory military service at 18 – before starting life - - in which Israelis are thrown into intimacy and mutual dependence and trust with people who think differently, as an opportunity to try on, experiment with, other positions; or in a *yeshivah*

, where the method of study is by dialogue between two students (Havruta), who study together and yet argue passionately (within a frame of shared loyalty to the texts and the institution);

(5) With people who think like you, whom you can trust (often family, friends); when you know that loyalty to basic social or ideological commitments is shared;

(7) When you belong to a group like Eliasoph's activists, with a TASK in the outside world. In an activists group which constraints members to deliberate on and formulate their external rhetoric within acceptable roles. During the *intifada* I was a member in such a group. We were parents of children finishing school, on their way to being conscripted into the army, which had to maneuver its rhetoric between the boundaries of "legitimate" protest against the military job of policing civilian population and NOT implying (or threatening) to advocate conscientious refusal to military service in general; or, in a recent case in which a group of communication scholars in Israel maneuvered between protesting over the politically motivated firing of news editors on Public TV by analyzing their work as professional, without opening ourselves to accusation that their are themselves politically motivated.

(8) When identity politics is adopted. When politics is transformed from the level of common interest, that is, from the open, disinterested, rational (Habemasian) model, to personal or identity politics, which takes the form of negotiation for your rights as feminists, or African Americans, or Morroccan or Russian immigrants to Israel, an upfront "self-interested" political talk aimed at achieving your group rights.

7. Cultural differences

(1) Do parties offer alternative policies for discussion? Political talk depends on the degree to which the society is politicized. Comparing between Israel and the US: Americans are

not offered different options of ideological and policy alternatives; therefore there is no incentive for political discussion (and for voting). If the agenda of candidates in election WERE different (in Israel parties do vary on major issues such as giving up territories for peace, separating state from religion) it may bring out discussion and voting.

Maybe in the context of the US it is easier to understand Schudson's position which allocates politics to experts, and "self-help" to people (who should resign themselves to monitoring big events). In the Israeli context it is difficult to conceive of politicians as "experts." You vote for a candidate because he stands for the value of not ruling over another people (or, for maintaining our historical rights). This has nothing to do with expertise and everything to do with values and morals. The experts come in at the level of implementation (which, in the "yes minister" tradition, do what they want anyway).

(2) Does media supply agendas and models for debating? Media can only reflect the political culture in which it operates. In the US political discussion is carried out only on cable, or late at night on the networks, and, even then, the discussion focuses almost entirely on strategics rather than on policies. In Israel political talkshows constitute prime time programming (on public AND commercial tv) almost every day (Williams and Liebes). They do present (and represent) a torn and conflictual society which has not (yet?) learned turns of talk, but which is intensely involved in the issues. On commercial tv these shows achieve ratings higher than *Alie Makbeal*'s in the US.

8. Substituting policy-oriented political talk by the rhetoric of sincerity and "caring."

But how can we expect people to talk politics when politicians and media, whose job (even Schudson would agree) it is, to have stopped doing it? As politics shifts from political to personal (in Israel too) – some say as a result of people finding the issues too complex, or the

political argument too unpleasant, or the politicians too self-interested and cynical – political talk on media and in public focuses on the personality of the candidate.

The only remaining question becomes – who can do the job best? Or, worse, “who really cares?” As politicians try to show that they do – talking increasingly to “overhearing” public rather than to colleagues, or professional journalists, as media is always present, and the next poll is one day away. They stay away from political talk, focusing instead on creating (what Merton and Benniger call) “pseudo gemeinschaft” with their public by trying to project they are genuinely, authentically, spontaneously, sincere (a contraction in terms, of course).

If one takes Schudson’s model of political talk seriously, democracy is in real trouble. Schudson points out that what we call conversation – the genuinely spontaneous flow among friends, which is creative, always pleasant, going nowhere – is opposed to political conversation which is by definition adversarial, pre-planned, and has to end in an agreed action (a written document). This kind of negotiation demands wholly different talents from the first. The need to simulate real conversation –as if equal, spontaneous, caring -- in order to be elected means the political skills needed to get into office have nothing to do with the skills needed once one gets there.