Journal of Public Deliberation

Volume 14 | Issue 1 Article 10

6-3-2018

Review of Political Translation: How Social Movement Democracies Survive by Nicole Doerr (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

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Abstract

In *Political Translation: How Social Movement Democracies Survive,* Nicole Doerr uncovers the role of translators as a "third voice within deliberation," neither participants nor facilitators but advocates for specific individuals to be heard and understood. Her empirical research on translation of various types and in various settings also raises broader theoretical issues about direct versus representative democracy.

Author Biography

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Keywords

deliberation, translation, oligarchy

A century ago, Robert Michels coined the term the "Iron Law of Oligarchy." Michels argued that the socialist and revolutionary labor parties and movements of Europe provided "the best field of observation" for the problem of centralized power, because they were committed in principle to equality and democracy (p. 11). If even these groups turned into oligarchies, the trend must be unavoidable.

This was the pattern Michels observed:

> Democracy is inconceivable without organization. [But] organization implies the tendency to oligarchy. In every organization, whether it be a political party, a professional union, or any other association of the kind, the aristocratic tendency manifests itself very clearly.… As a result of organization, every party or professional union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed.… All power thus proceeds in a natural cycle: issuing from the people, it ends by raising itself above the people (pp. 21, 32, 38).

He concluded by predicting that "this cruel game will continue without end" (p. 408).

The Iron Law of Oligarchy remains a central challenge for all democratic movements and methods. Since about 2003, the University of Copenhagen Sociologist Nicole Doerr has been observing successors of Michels' socialist and revolutionary movements: the heterogeneous leftist organizations that have come together in contexts like the European Social Forum, the US Social Forum, and a low-income city in California.

She observes many of the same specific dynamics that struck Michels, and she adds new ones. For example, experienced, professional organizers tend to know one another and give each other much more attention than they give to newcomers (pp. 33-34). Representatives of "New Left" organizations that demand loose, horizontal interactions appear to union organizers to be "arrogant and upper-class" (p. 32). Questions that matter to marginalized people—such as whether the location of the next meeting will be accessible to them—get tabled as irrelevant (p. 56). Despite strong leftist convictions, leaders reveal unconscious bias against people unlike themselves, such as women from Turkey and Eastern Europe (pp. 54-5). Decisions laboriously reached in earlier meetings become sacrosanct, even though newcomers have reasons to object to them. The need to translate for–or to speak more slowly to–linguistic minorities is perceived as a mere nuisance (p. 39). Gatherings tend to grow more "ideologically homogeneous" over time (p. 54), as those who don't agree drop out.

But Doerr also contributes a fascinating positive finding. At first, she first noticed that a multilingual meeting was more equitable and deliberative than meetings in which translation was unnecessary (p. 25). That seemed paradoxical. One would assume that if some participants require simultaneous translation, a layer of inequality will be added.

But then Doerr started studying the translators. Although they were easily dismissed as providing a mere technical support service—and one that inconvenienced the speakers of the dominant languages—they also became involved in advocating for inclusion. They were professionally resistant to entering the discussion of substance, since their job was to translate for others. But they were also professionally committed to making sure that the people they served could be heard. Thus, they often intervened on matters of process.

The translators suddenly took center stage when they went on strike during a Paris gathering, with the terse announcement, "we translators now collectively interrupt our linguistic service" (p. 42). Their demand was to change the list of official speakers so that more immigrants were included. They quickly prevailed, thanks to their leverage over the entire meeting.

At the US Social Forum in Atlanta, there were again linguistic translators. But by now, Doerr had begun using the term more broadly. Translators are people who enter a discussion without having substantive views of their own but with the goal of making sure that certain specific people, vulnerable to being ignored, are heard and understood. One of the activists in Atlanta "often intervened when established NGO staffers working on immigration reform had trouble not only understanding the language but also the content and importance of demands by undocumented immigrants." She told Doerr, "What we did for the US Social Forum was translation … But it's not just about linguistic translation. It's also about emotion. It's a translation of space, of class, of gender" (p. 59).

These translators–linguistic or otherwise–emerge for Doerr as a "third voice within deliberation" (p. 10), neither participants nor facilitators. She recognizes that they have the power to advance their own interests (pp. 47-9). In the words of the old Italian pun, "*traduttore, traditore*" (translator = traitor). Their value is dependent on their motivations. Doerr devotes a chapter to a California example in which bilingual elected officials favored their self-interests: "translation had turned into representation and domination" (p. 97). In meetings at city hall, these officials "repeatedly interrupted, disciplined, marginalized, and implicitly stigmatized residents," especially those who spoke in Spanish.

But then a grassroots organizing group created community forums and invited the same city leaders to participate on its turf. Volunteer translators played essential roles in designing these forums, in preparing the city officials to be respectful at the meetings (pp. 102-3), and then intervening to demand that specific questions be answered (p. 110). While literally translating between Spanish and English, the organizers also explained technical matters in understandable terms. Although the votes at these community forums had no legal force, the city council made some concessions in response.

For practitioners of deliberative democracy, the implication of this book is to identify and support people who "translate" for deliberators. Translation can be literal—from one language to another—or it can mean any effort to help someone else be heard and understood.

I'd like to emphasize four more theoretical themes.

First, we are used to a dichotomy between direct and representative democracy. But translators (linguistic or otherwise) complicate that. They *represent* individuals in order to *permit direct participation*.

Second, the beneficial cases in Doer's book depend on organized power. The translators in Paris went on strike, withholding their services all at once. The community organizers in the US case engaged sufficient numbers of voters that they could compel city officials to attend their meetings. It's not just the act of translating that matters; it's the translators' connection to organizations. (At this point, Michels would ask how organized translators can avoid becoming a new oligarchy.)

Third, translators sometimes escape notice; their influence is unseen because all they seem to be doing is translating someone else's words (p. 126). I imagine that listeners literally look at the original speakers, not at the translators. This invisibility can be problematic if translators misuse their power. It can be a bit unfair, since the translators go un-thanked. But it's also a strategic asset: translators can get away with influencing the powerful when others would fail.

Finally, these acts of translation are classic examples of "public work," in Harry Boyte's sense: "self-organized efforts by a mix of people who create goods, material or symbolic, whose civic value is determined through an ongoing process of deliberation" (Boyte and Scarnatti, p. 78). Thinking of political translation as a form of *work* is helpful because it brings out the translators' professional

commitments and values and the craft-like skills that they contribute to make democracy work better.

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