

Book Reviews

Beyond Civility: The Competing Obligations of Citizenship, by Robert Danisch and William Keith. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2020. 200 pp.

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The role of civility in public discourse is continuously contested and some suggest that we face a “crisis in civility” (Stohr). This civility crisis coincides with the culture wars and becomes even more relevant amidst demands for social justice and equity. The past year is no exception, and conversations about civility are as important as ever. In their book *Beyond Civility: The Competing Obligations of Citizenship*, Robert Danisch and William Keith take on the challenging task of parsing through debates surrounding civility to highlight democracy’s fragility and, hence, our need for civility. According to Danisch and Keith, it is through modes of civility that we rehabilitate democracy.

Since the book’s publication, we have seen an insurrection at the Capitol by a combination of white nationalists and white supremacists, the attempted kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, anti-maskers armed with assault rifles engaged in public protest, the murders of unarmed George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and the protests that followed. On one hand, protests against police brutality are referenced as examples of uncivil, riotous, and violent protest. On the other hand, armed anti-maskers are seen as just exercising their freedom of speech. In both cases, civility is invoked as the key to working through times of political and/or social unrest, and these invocations exemplify the centrality of debates over civility and social change, to which this volume contributes significantly. Continued tension and division among the public prompts Danisch and Keith to ask: How do we move forward when we have significant disagreements about what we value?

Some research concerning civility interprets civility as manners or decorum (Bone et al.; Carter); other research on civility argues that it cannot be understood outside of power relationships such as race, gender, ethnicity, and ability (Báez and Ore; Bone et al.; Carey; Espiritu et al.; Foss and Griffin; Lozano-Reich and Cloud; Nyong’o and Wazana Tompkins). More specifically, some feminist rhetorical scholars have discussed the roles of civility and invitational approaches as necessary to deliberation (Bone et al.; Foss and Griffin). However, Danisch and Keith argue for the importance of context when evaluating civility and distinguish themselves from scholarship that interprets civility as politeness or good manners (14). Instead, they interpret civility as “a form of communicative agency in which power lies within a person’s ability to use language (and other

symbol systems) to form relationships” (9). For Danisch and Keith, negative experiences emerge from the negatives of civility (or pseudocivility), which they define as “the invocation of weak civility norms against strong civility behaviors, resulting in a refusal to engage on the grounds that engaging some difference is always uncivil, even if the difference is arguably of great public and moral importance” (23). Their inquiry is propelled by questions such as: “How do we save civility from racists?” (7). In order to more accurately interpret instances of civility or incivility, they present a typology of civility: weak civility, strong civility, pseudocivility, weak incivility, and strong incivility.

Danisch and Keith are optimistic about the potential of civility, interpreting it as multidimensional rather than a universal or singular interpretation or application. However, they admit that this optimism “rests in part on not finding ourselves endlessly the targets of injustice and exclusion” (7). Readers may find resonance here with Susan Herbst’s understanding of civility in *Rude Democracy*, where, rather than focusing on defining civility—which she feels is ultimately a distraction—she attends to the “strategic uses of civility and incivility,” which she conceptualizes as “an asset or tool, a mechanism, or even a technology of sorts” (3). One of the major differences between Herbst and those who understand civility as manners or decorum is that Herbst is more focused on civility as a problematic for deliberation. Herbst avoids a static interpretation of civility and prefers to understand civility as a concept that has evolved over time and been influenced by social changes.

Similarly, and following Aristotle, Danisch and Keith remind readers that no one can impose their will and beliefs onto an audience without them knowing. Thus, “the power of communication is relational; it does not belong to a subject but is activated in the relationship that a subject forms with an audience” (16-17). They take up John Dewey’s understanding of democracy as “a set of social relationships of interaction between citizens” rather than a system of government (14). Within this context, civility is understood as a component of “rhetorical citizenship” in that it “implicates and recommends specific communicative modes of interaction between citizens” (53). Danisch and Keith focus on civility as relationality and explain the role that it plays in citizenship, arguing that there are competing obligations of citizenship, particularly in a pluralistic society. A good practice of rhetorical citizenship, they argue, is being able to determine when civility is appropriate and when it is not. The obligation of rhetorical citizenship, explain Danisch and Keith, is thus to identify and distinguish incidents that require civility and balance them with those that require incivility. We cannot rely too much on incivility at the risk of losing relationally, but we must also not always demand civility, because valid criticisms of power are necessary for a functioning democracy.

The authors explicitly decline to label civility as always good or bad based on its complex nature and the context. And they remind us that Plato feared rhetoric, too, for its potential to be abused. Danisch and Keith therefore ask: What are the stakes of eliminating civility in communication? Informed by American pragmatism and rhetorical theory, the thrust of their argument focuses on how civility plays out in real deliberative situations. For them, what is at stake is not the transfer of ideas through symbols, but rather the potential for community. A chief argument of feminists is that civility is influenced by power relationships (Báez and Ore; Cloud; Lozano-Reich and Cloud; Espiritu et al.). Moreover, Black and brown feminists have examined the role that race plays in expectations of civility (Báez and Ore; Carey; Lozano-Reich and Cloud). Danisch and Keith disagree with arguments by Black and brown feminist rhetorical scholars that civility is synonymous with maintaining the status quo and instead make arguments that civility is necessary for social change (23-24). They argue that communication and communicative practices are not just a matter of persuasion or even “mere” discourse, but about creating community and relationships with others across difference (8, 14).

The argument of the book unfolds thusly: Chapter one begins to parse out the “moral quandary” of civility (27). Danisch and Keith explain that civility is a toolbox necessary to manage the “tension between challenging the status quo and preserving an ongoing community” given that this tension is an inevitable product of a plural society (58). Thus, civility is necessary to propel social change. They discuss civility through the example of White House Press Secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, being asked to leave the Red Hen restaurant in 2018 (27). While they ultimately determine this interaction to be civil, they do not think it was the most effective approach.

Chapter two focuses on the deliberative and critical imaginaries that inform how civility is interpreted. The deliberative imaginary prioritizes dialogic forms of communication, whereas the critical imaginary favors monologic forms (122). Danisch and Keith are invested in the deliberative imaginary and, thus, see the potential of civility for creating relationality with others through communication. Furthermore, they consider the ethical aspects of civility and argue that, “[u]nderstanding how civility is the site of ethical decision-making requires us to identify some conceptions and misconceptions about civility and consider what it means to cross a line into incivility” (28).

In chapter three, the authors identify four different roles people fill in the discursive sphere: inquirers, advocates, warriors, and trolls. Danisch and Keith draw distinctions between the roles rather than allow these roles to bleed into each other. For instance, when discussing the role of the warriors—individuals who are categorized as “do whatever it takes” or “ends justify the means” types—Danisch and Keith explain, “[t]he warrior’s aggressive tactics may be an

attempt to shock and shame people into acknowledging their role in injustice and oppression. Fair enough, though we can still ask, “At what cost? With what result?” (119). Also important is their distinction between the trolls and the warriors. Whereas warriors are taking active part in the conversation or debate over social justice issues, trolls are just there to disrupt and derail the conversation. Trolls do not have to be invested in either side.

Chapter four begins with the premise that it is not tenable to only engage in civil or uncivil deliberation. Here, the authors seek to trace the contours of incivility and its ability or inability to create social and political change. Mirroring their previous discussions of weak and strong civility, this chapter identifies weak and strong incivility. They define weak incivility as “rude behaviors intended to offend or produce discomfort through acts that violate social norms of expectations” (126). Strong incivility takes that a step further and is characterized as “behaviors and communication practices that disrupt, intentionally or not, the regular flow of discourse and thus strengthen and deepen divisions between groups that are understood as morally distinct and opposed” (126). Although they provide a typology, it is still unclear what strategies of incivility cross the line and which ones do not.

In chapter five, “Strong Civility and Social Justice,” the authors discuss the relationship between persuasion and relationality (167). Strong civility is defined as a set of behaviors that seek to build community and confront differences, which includes “deliberations, deep listening, dialogue, confrontation, protest, and civil disobedience” (24). They conceive of strong civility as needing care: “rhetorical citizens ought to care about the strangers whom they meet within the scene of democratic culture even if they disagree with those strangers vehemently about a particular value or course of action. This is because the greatest threat to democracy is in the way in which we treat those with whom we disagree” (169). Coming from the pragmatist tradition, they argue that the only way to build relationality with others is if we can persuade them, civilly, or else we risk alienating them. They maintain that strong civility is necessary for social change. Although they leave space for some instances of incivility, they urge us to strive for a balance between civil and uncivil.

Beyond Civility concisely identifies the various layers of the debate over civility and makes an important case for reinvesting in a complex and generous understanding of civility. Their case studies help us consider civility and incivility in different contexts. Additionally, they outline what is at stake in the debate over civility. In a time of social injustice and state-sanctioned violence, these conversations are crucial in determining what future we want to live in. According to Dansich and Keith, if we have any hope of caring for each other and creating relationships with others, civility is necessary. I agree that

we should care for others, though, after reading, I still cannot confidently say whether—or how—“uncivil” acts of protest are devoid of care or relationality.

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