

# Re-examining Political Silence: New Openings for Research and Practice

Written by Sophia Dingli and Thomas N. Cooke

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Political silences are powerful. This much we learned from critical IR theorists, including Cynthia Enloe (2004) who articulated the silences of marginalised women in international relations, Steve Smith (1995) who argued that silences are disciplines' most important voices, and Ken Booth (2007: 160) who posited that 'all silences "are against some body and against some thing"'. These key works represent the first generation of inquiry into political silence, particularly as an object of study in International Relations. They established the intellectual foundation for raising questions about the ethics of research, and they disrupted overly descriptive and normative accounts of political silence. Alas, these works are ontologically limited to specific types and registers of political silence(s) themselves. Our concern with them is that they are (inadvertently) foreclosing critical (re)examination of precisely what is meant by 'political silence'.

Even the most precursory appraisal of global news signals to us as analysts that political silence is far more ambiguous, variegated, and differentiated than IR scholarship implies. With an instant, we observe powerful politicians such as the President of the United States attempting to silence his critics and the proliferation of a myriad of silent protests across the globe. Political silence is not merely a manifestation of violence or domination. Beyond the compulsion to uniformly conceptualise silence-as-domination, there resides an opportunity to (re)conceptualise the concept altogether.

Our edited volume *Political Silence: Meanings, functions and ambiguity* endeavours to do that. The collection begins by delineating the conceptual narrowness of the first generation of political silence scholarship from the logocentric nature of Western political practice as evidenced in early Ancient Greece. We also trace this narrowness as bound to the conceptual premium placed upon the 'voice', due to its supposedly emancipatory nature (Dhawan 2007, pp. 228-31). To counteract established thinking of silence-as-domination, we cultivate an intellectual attitude that pluralizes the concept. As political silences that manifest uniquely from context to context, each contributor analyses identifies the concept as a productive expression of intentional (and even unintentional) agency. For example, silence as a status or space that renders meaning inaccessible, and thereby disrupts the intentions and actions of other actors. This approach does not preclude that silencing, defined as the practice of removing subjects' voices, invariably takes place. Instead, our approach foregrounds power and agency in a way that resists the reification of silence in relation to violence, domination, and victimhood. Our approach also allows us to engage with political silences that are productive irrespective of intentionality (or lack thereof). This approach allows us to investigate the effects, functions and meanings of political silences – even when the actor does not 'speak' or perform in self-evident ways.

Our volume is not the first to reconsider political silence. The previous decade exhibits an ongoing renaissance in IR and political theory, which indeed examine silence as a concept (Freeden 2015; Dingli 2015; Ferguson 2003) and phenomenon (Malhotra and Rowe 2013; Parpart and Parashar 2018) in ways that also upset first generation accounts. In many ways, our volume sits alongside these efforts, but differs from them in being purposefully pluralistic and inclusive.

Our volume does not abide by the conventions of any particular theory or discipline. In order to push political silence

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out of its stabilized intellectual packaging, our project is intentionally interdisciplinary. A resounding issue with the study of political silence thus far is that its intellectual treatment has been largely inner-disciplinary. For example, the majority of the literature contributing to the study of political silence thus far, as we have noted above, resides within IR and political theory. With the exception of feminist studies, these fields rest upon conventional intellectual and normative treatments that are highly familiar to the fields – particularly when dealing with the notion of agency. The material, embodied, metaphysical, material, and ideological preconditions required in order to satisfy scholarly identification with agency in these fields are not equipped to take into account other preconditions celebrated in other fields. As another example, consider the metaphysical framework of Karl Petschke's chapter. In order to articulate a field of potentiality for political agency amenable to the life of vegetation and plants, Petschke's analysis requires a radically different ontology when identifying a political actor. The matter of how and whether a non-human, non-animal thing exists inherently requires not only a metaphysical and philosophical flexibility that is deliberately non-anthropocentric and postmodern. It also requires an intellectual attitude cultivated in a field unlike IR or political theory in order to proceed. Petschke's work cannot be reduced to a specific field as he is an interdisciplinary scholar trained in a variety of traditions, including a variety from critical theory and the highly interdisciplinary fields of Communication Studies and Cultural Studies. Overall, our collection thus owes a large debt to numerous fields, such as Philosophy, Diplomacy Studies, Musicology, Science and Technology Studies, Communication Studies, Critical Data Studies, Acoustic Ecology, and many others that have been central to forwarding silence as a political phenomenon – particularly where International Relations failed to do so.

## Existing studies of Political Silence

Long since the initial impressions of International Relations, Communication Studies scholars intellectualized silence as a form of communication – not as an absence thereof (Jaworski 1993). Moreover, they identify various types of silences as these manifest in communication itself: stillness, pause, silencing, and 'eloquent silences' (Ephratt 2008, pp.1912-13). Though we acknowledge that pauses and stillness which are important in rhetoric are of interest to political studies, the most relevant silences for us are silencing and eloquent silences.

Eloquent political silence is perhaps most effectively exemplified in the politics of resistance or *insubordination* studied by Vincent Jungkunz (2012: pp.138, 144). His work reveals that while insubordinate silences may seek to empower, protest, resist, or refuse the workings of hegemony, they also manifest, in feminist thought, for example, as a modality of *secrecy*, as a 'legitimate and even empowering strategy for dealing with difficult situations' (Parpart 2010, p.15). The notion of secrecy is a particularly unique manifestation of political silence. It is expressed by marginalised political agents that seek to withhold information as a means of achieving a given goal. And by withholding information, secrecy withholds access to the meaning of one's thoughts and intentions. Secrecy is indeed a political silence precisely because it is highly disruptive to the means of communication that otherwise seek to extrapolate knowledge.

Similarly, *strategic* political silence refers to the attempt to obscure a politician's intentions. Strategic silences unfold as politicians' dash the public's expectation that they should speak (Brummett 1980, p.289), which carries with it the effect of creating meanings of mystery, uncertainty, passivity and/or relinquishment (Brummett 1980, p.290). Recent work on this topic argues that *omission* and *concealment* should be considered as part of the repertoire of strategic silences available to politicians (Schröter and Taylor 2017). These works exemplify the ways in which silences are productive for the agent as well as the ambiguity they entail – aspects that we will return to later on.

From philosophy, our collection observes that the productive function of political silence has been highlighted in relation to the constitution of both communities and identities. This is of course less apparent but certainly not less important. Consider, for example, the importance of silence in constituting the knowing subject in Martin Heidegger's work. In *Being and Time* (2010), he argued that only in silencing the idle chatter of everyday life could one become familiar with their own being-in-the-world. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb, on the other hand, takes an anthropological approach to the issue, arguing that silence (in addition to idle chatter) is the framework through which essentialized identities are produced (Achino-Loeb 2006, p.35).

From Adam Kingsmith's contribution to our project, which takes cue in part from the lessons and logics afforded by

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Musicology, we recognize John Cage's composition 4'33" for the ways in which a moment of silence produces complex social relationships. 4'33" is famously devoid of musical notation. The performer sits in silence, drawing the audience's attention toward the incidental sounds of the music hall, of the street, and of their own impatience. As Kingsmith (2019) notes, the composition forces people to recognise the collective as integral to the performance. Beyond Musicology, sociologists and historians have also indicated the ways in which silence constitutes community. For example, sociologists have investigated how conspiracies of silence are sustained and how they in turn sustain particular manifestations of community (Zerubavel 2006).

On the other hand, historians have shown how political silences construct the memory of war 'to suspend or truncate open conflict over the meaning and/or justification of violence, either domestic or transnational' (Winter 2010, p.5). This silence is constructed through libel laws and censorship, as well as through subtler processes that – in turn – construct an often uniform and morally good or neutral understanding of the communal-state and its role in political violence. The constitutive function of silence is unavoidable and often oppressive. This is investigated by critical scholars seeking to politicise what appears to be neutral material and discursive structures, achieved by revealing how silences prevent agents from expressing themselves and by making their voices unintelligible.

## Breaking Political Silence out of the Box

As we argued earlier, political silence is a multimodal phenomenon. It is often ambiguous and, as such, cannot be easily translated. This, of course, is challenging for anyone studying it. Therefore, though our volume is pluralistic, our contributors uniformly account for contextual factors, such as history, power-relations, and power structure in each of their respective studies. Furthermore, and unlike first generation studies of political silence in International Relations, contributors pay attention to the '*subjective participant interpretations, constructions or definitions of such aspects of the social environment*' (Dijk 2006, p.163 *italics in the original*).

Doing so allows them to attend to the ambiguities of single silences since they are experienced differently by self-interpreting agents. Furthermore, each of our chapters focus on the relation between silence, agency and power – with each approaching this triangulation of components in their own distinctive ways. Our works are thus conceptual and theoretical as they are empirical. Most contributions cover all aspects, though for the purpose of briefly summarizing the content of the volume, we group them into two categories, respectively. We outline theme here, beginning with mostly empirical works which are incredibly diverse in the coverage of digital, ecological, and mnemonic silences, among many others.

In his chapter, Thomas Cooke (2019) examines the ways in which smartphone hacktivist applications freeze metadata in a manner which amounts to silencing the noisy data flows comprising the discrete computational functions of Big Data. He illustrates how such interventionist software technologies allow the user to become aware of and intervene in these otherwise discrete data flows by deciding when, how, and whether the data should be released back into their respective capitalistically-delineated flows. Karl Petsche's (2019) chapter focuses on the voicelessness of vegetation – of plants, a kind of silence that is radically different than the silence experienced by humans. Why? Because plants have no internality. This is not to say that plants do not communicate with each other, but rather that the nature of their communication cannot be rendered intelligible through anthropocentric lenses. Similarly, their silence cannot be made to 'speak' politically. Focusing on the silence of plants, he reveals the limits of human understanding and invites us to rethink how we, in turn, politicise their silence. Faye Donnelly's (2019) contribution engages with silent commemoration. In particular she engages with the 'two minutes' of collective 'silence' which she troubles by engaging with trauma and attempts to contest official narratives of war. In this chapter she illustrates that often the agent who is being silent actively (re)writes, (re)inscribes, and (re)signifies the public silence they are part of.

Frederic Ramel's (2019) work illustrates how understandings of silence in music were central in challenging religious understandings of silence, which allowed silence to be claimed for and utilised by temporal authorities in Renaissance Italy. This took the form of instituting new silent, secular public spaces, like the concert hall and of making silence central in diplomatic practice. Finally, David Wellman's (2019) chapter focuses on diplomacy which he argues would improve through employing compassionate listening for inter-religious dialogue as well as to

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confront ecological disaster. Silence in this context enables one to quiet their mind, body, and soul thus promoting mutual understanding, agreement, and humility.

The conceptually focused chapters of the volume address both particular modalities of silence, silence as a concept and/or propose alternative research programmes. In his chapter Noe Cornago (2019) argues against the practice of approaching silence metaphorically -for example using 'silence' as a metaphor for domination- because doing so often leads researchers to project the assumptions of particular disciplines onto the concept. Instead, he argues for a metonymical treatment of silence in global politics whereby we inquire into the function of silence in each particular domain to (re)articulate the concept so that seemingly insignificant phenomena can be connected on a global, political scale. In their chapter, Sophia Dingli and Sameera Khalfey(2019) focus upon silence-as-exit from the political order. They reject the blanket conceptualisation of silence-as-exit as violent exclusion – especially when silence-as-exit is performed by peripheral (to power) agents. Finally, they trace the predominant conceptualisation of silence to the logocentric understanding of legitimacy in Western political theory.

Xavier Guillaume and Elisabeth Schweiger's(2019) chapter argues that we should start moving away from a focus on the meaning of silence, instead focusing upon what silence does. They argue that performing silence during debates, collective policy-making or language games, creates ambiguity which can reorder the flow and direction of the debate itself. Silence can also be used to yield expectations to speak, in ways that upset the order while also binding and joining like-participants together. Adam Kingsmith's (2019) chapter reads silence as complementarity which he juxtaposes with noise read as alterity, or other-ness. Kingsmith argues that the usage of silence invites noise. However, in a language game, remaining silent when being expected to speak, may call attention to the predicament itself, often forcing the aggressor to become noisy. Finally, Robert Latham's(2019) coda to the project posits "residual silences" to conceptualise marginal forms of silence that remain after surface relations are analyzed, such as those found by tracing the political recession of the proletariat. Latham argues that residual silences offer an avenue and platform through and upon which anti-capitalist agency unfolds.

## Conclusion

Political silences are ubiquitous. They are varied in their meanings, functions, and effects; thus, political silences are often irreducibly ambiguous. Political silence, whether intentional or unintentional, produces uncertainty, in such a way that entangles the recipient of silence in confusion. Along this line of thinking, our volume posits that political silence represents an opening to (re)configuration, (re)collectivism, and (re)deployment – not their demise. Of course, such openings depend upon a complex entanglement of many, many variables – material ones, ideological ones, and structural ones as they unfold in physical spaces and as they are embodied in an actor's reactions. Much like the way in which silencing the noisy data streams of the Big Data industry depends upon the availability of hacktivist technologies, these technologies can be overridden. Much like the way in which the space of diplomatic meetings is central to the feasibility of compassionate listening, they too can be interrupted by a diplomat's fleeting patience and diminishing energy. Nonetheless, our collection is about openings – particularly for future research into the viabilities, productivities, and possibilities of and for political silences as a result of limits, constraints, and failures – not only in real life, but in intellectual attitude and orientation. This is an exciting new area made possible by contesting and going beyond existing research and by breaking the theoretical and disciplinary molds.

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