

## **Disturbing Binaries in Political Thought: Silence as Political Activism**[1]

### Summary

'Keeping silent' can be a meaningful political event, a form of political activism that generates new political subjectivities and alters existing realities by reconfiguring power relations. To flesh out this argument, this paper attends to a particular silent protest and affirms it as a tactic employed by an emergent political collectivity to make itself perceptible, declare an injustice and challenge institutional power. As such, the silent event under scrutiny does not merely invite a turning of our attention to a practice that breaks the association of the political subject with the speaking subject; it also invites a reconsideration of what we are accustomed to accept as political activism. 'Keeping silent' is a critical practice, indeed, because it manifests an alternative possibility of being and acting; in so doing, it disrupts established patterns of thought and practice, and more specifically the rigid distinction between speech and silence.

Keywords: dualism; de Certeau; activism; non-violent movements; democracy

*'If you want something, you better make some noise'*

*Malcolm X*

## Introduction

The study of political activism has long achieved to challenge the speech-centered tradition of political thought, manifested<sup>[2]</sup> in influential approaches such as the deliberative turn (eg Dryzek 2000), discourse ethics (Habermas 1984, 1998), and even in more radical approaches to communicative democracy (eg Young 1996). Rather, recent studies of social movements draw our attention to non-verbal forms of political engagement. Such instances are the shift of emphasis from speech to the body which, using the framework of performance studies, points to performative acts as means of making politics happen (see, for example, Caster, 2004; Lichtenfels and Rouse, 2013; Madison, 2010); the study of image events staged by activist groups for mass media dissemination, which enlarge our understanding of audience creation and political argumentation through political activism (DeLuca, 1999); and the consideration of profound encounters, such as flavor, which turn parts of the body, such as the mouth, to organs of political action, interrupting our conventional perception of political activism (Panagia, 2009). The performing subject; the image-creating subject; the tasting subject: political subjectivities that transcend the image of the political subject as speaking subject and render perceptible alternative ways of appearing in public and acting politically.

The<sup>[3]</sup> silent subject is yet another appearance of the political subject which has received relatively limited attention. This is not to suggest that the issue of silence as a mode of political engagement lacks attention in social and political thought; a number of thinkers scrutinize the diverse manifestations of silence in public life and expose the polysemy that characterizes this mode of action (eg Ferguson 2003; Zumbrunnen, 2008;

Göker 2011, Jungkurz 2012, Whitehead and Bowman, 2012; Dobson, 2014). Rather, this is to point both to the limited attention that silence has received compared to speech and, more particularly, to the lack of scrutiny of the practice of 'keeping silent' as political tactic and therefore as a certain form of protest and activism that channels political demands. A possible explanation is that its effectiveness as political intervention depends upon the circumstances amidst which it emerges; tactical silence is situational, it is informed and sustained by *kairos*.<sup>[4]</sup> Under certain circumstances, this paper argues, a silent protest can be a productive force that generates new political subjectivities and reconfigures existing power relations. In this case, it is a critical practice that invites a turning of our attention to modes of political engagement that transcend the threshold of speech and expand the perceived range of activism.<sup>[5]</sup>

This<sup>[6]</sup> paper attends to a silent protest that took place at the University of California, Davis in 2011 and proposes that we can attend to this practice of dissent as a tactical and critical political practice. As such, 'keeping silent' is a meaningful act not merely in that it brings about political change, but also because it disrupts the primacy of language as means of communication of political demands, as well as the association of political participation with speaking. Affirming the importance of tactical and critical silence, the paper suggests, we deepen our understanding of what counts as political engagement, whereas we also broaden our acknowledgment of the role of non-verbal practices as forms of activism. The paper, then, not only responds to the call to 'find ways of incorporating silence to the political process' (Dobson, 2014, 99); it also aspires to provide a theoretical framework for disturbing the prevalence of binary oppositions in our thought and particularly that of speech/silence. It does so by demonstrating how rich practices such as 'keeping silent' blur the rigid distinction between pairs of concepts such as silence/

speech, and resist the sharp categorizations following stark dichotomizations. Political practice resists rigorous theorization.

The aim of the paper, therefore, is threefold: first, it points to the tactical nature of the practice of 'keeping silent' and therefore its relevance to the particular occasion or *kairos*; second, it shows how this is also a critical practice, one that contributes towards the deepening of our understanding of political engagement, by drawing our attention away from electoral processes, community politics and consumer boycotts and towards less noticed yet no less important aspects of political activism; and third, it illustrates how political practice disturbs the binary logic implicated in political thought. The event at UC Davis curves a place for under-theorized aspects of political engagements in our political thinking, demonstrating how - under certain circumstances - the silent subject can be a political subject and that 'keeping silent' is not the opposite of argumentative practice. What is perceivable as political participation can occasionally be less noticeable, yet equally eloquent and important to an articulated political claim.

### Making Sense of the Silent Protest at UC Davis

A woman walks down a paved path, arms crossed over her chest, as if she is protecting it, shoulders curved forwards. She looks weakened and puzzled, a bit worried as she passes through hundreds of young people who form the path. They remain seated on the ground, silent, as she moves surrounded by cameras clicking. A sense of embarrassment, perhaps; an eerie moment, for sure. It is this silent way that students at the University of California, Davis chose to express their disdain for Chancellor Linda B. Katehi and her refusal to resign after the relevant call from the school's faculty association.<sup>1</sup>

This<sup>[7]</sup> relatively unknown story is linked to the more popular event that took place on November 18, 2011 when campus police pepper-sprayed a group of students who

protested against budget cuts and tuition hikes. The students, members of the Occupy Wall Street movement, chanted 'You use weapons! We use our voice!' seated on a paved path in the campus quad, when a police officer used pepper-spray against them (Cherkis, 2011). Following the event, a campaign was started against Chancellor Katehi, holding her responsible for the outbreak of violence on the behalf of the campus police and calling her to resign, a call that she refused. The day after the pepper-spray event Chancellor Katehi, following a press conference, remained inside one of the University buildings amid safety concerns, since the building was surrounded by students who were protesting against her decision to confront non-violent protesters with violence (Horowitz, 2013). Even though reportedly students for hours chanted things like 'we are peaceful' and 'just walk home', Katehi did not leave the building in what can be seen as an effort to give the impression that the students were somehow holding her hostage.<sup>ii</sup> When after several hours she decided to walk out, the students sat down, locked their hands and formed the silent 'walk of shame', down which Katehi walked. Reporters asked Katehi whether she still felt threatened by the students, a sign that further enhances the hypothesis that she had created the impression that she was afraid of a violent response on behalf of the students.

Although the pepper-spray incident traveled around the world through the news, the silent protest against the Chancellor received relatively little attention. Perhaps this mere fact indicates that we are more familiar with voice, and with news associated with it, rather than listening to silence, to that which remains more difficult to perceive and explain. How are we to make sense of an event like the one that took place at UC Davis, then? I suggest we cannot, if by 'making sense' we mean to fit it within established models of political analysis. The reason is that the particular event comes to interrupt our senses and by doing so it invites a reconfiguring of our associational lives (Panagia, 2009, 3). It is this very disruption, this reconfiguration and the way it disarranges established power relations that needs to be scrutinized.

The disruptive nature of the silent protest at UC Davis lies in the tactical and critical character of the students' intervention. A[8] protest is a priori a form of nonroutinised action (Della-Porta and Diani, 2006, 165). It is a performative attempt to persuasion. But a *silent* protest as the one under scrutiny here, more specifically, is disruptive not merely in that it interferes with routine or everydayness, but primarily in that it challenges established power relations and provokes a turning of our attention when and where we encounter it as the unexpected alternative. Not that staged silent protests are rare in political life; for certain activist groups they are an established practice to convey messages, protest injustices and forward demands.<sup>iii</sup> But[9] the aspect of silent political activism that I thematize here resists the appropriation of what counts not only as activism, but also as argumentation, due to the way it relates to *kairos*. To deploy silence in the place of the chant 'we use our voice!', is not to refuse to communicate; rather, it is a very means for communicating resistance by proclaiming an injustice to a superior part. Silence is not political in itself, but it can produce political effects if exploited tactically and critically in certain contexts; as form of protest, silence has a situational character.

'Keeping silent' is a transformative practice. For instance, as the audience of the protest, of the performative event, our attention and perception is disrupted and altered, since we encounter a newly established political reality. A silent protest creates a spectacle and therefore a space for intervention that calls for attention. In this sense it is a form of staged activism that transcends the confinement of communication of political messages to speech acts and of argumentation to the utterance of logical premises and conclusions. Like any staged performance, it 'makes the audience a social body joined in affect' (Caster, 2004, 107), it creates and transforms audiences that are hospitable to the changes that the performance seeks to bring about. As Delicath and Deluca (2003) show, such dramatic acts of protest do not just challenge norms as to what constitutes acceptable means of communication; they also broaden the scope of participation in the

public sphere to include subaltern counterpublics; they create opportunities for debate; and they animate the possibilities for public discourse and therefore expand argumentation.

One way to 'make sense' of the event at UC Davis, then, is by understanding it as a dramatic act of protest. Indeed, it broadens the scope of political communication and engagement by expanding our understanding of argumentation beyond verbal forms, inviting us to receive the students' silence as their way to proclaim an injustice and forward a political claim. However, this event also brings to our attention the situational, tactical and critical character of political activism. Consequently, it disrupts the binary logic according to which political freedom is attained through participation expressed with the use of voice; the absence of the latter does not preclude the possibility of declaring an injustice. The appearance of silence in public life resists single interpretations and opens up possibilities for new understandings of the political. In the following section I visit some of these appearances, in order to mark out the space for 'keeping silent' as political tactic that the event at UC Davis illustrates.[10]

### The Polysemy of Silence

The attempt to affirm the practice of 'keeping silent' as a form of political engagement and therefore as a means to create and project a sense of collectivity, brings to one's attention the fluid and polyvalent essence of silence. Studies in the fields of rhetoric, linguistics and communications have long supported the case for the richness and complexity of silence as cultural and communication phenomenon (see Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1985).

Silence[11] is not only the result of imposition, exclusion or denial to participate; it is also 'symbolic', 'rhetorical', 'empowering', 'engaging' (Glenn, 2004). Silence can be as powerful as speech, it can deliver meaning and function 'as a constellation of symbolic strategies

that (like spoken language) serves many functions' (Glenn, 2004, xi). Yet, as Glenn's study demonstrates, silence is open to multiple interpretations and functions.

Political[12] theorists are also aware of the polysemy of silence. Ferguson (2003), for example, explicitly argues that silence functions 'in multiplicitous, fragmentary, even paradoxical ways', being thus irreducible 'to any particular political functionality' (Ferguson, 2003, 58). He also points to the inherent power of silence, 'whether as a form of subjugation, resistance, or motivation' (Ferguson, 2003, 50), as well as to its dual constitutive function: on the one hand, it creates identities and enables communities, on the other it disrupts organization. In politics, there is no definitive power or role for silence; its overlapping dynamics 'can be iterated, investigated, and explored, but they cannot be fixed or predetermined' (Ferguson, 2003, 62). Any attempt to attend to silence as form of activism needs to affirm this fluidity of silence.

Zumbrunnen (2008) makes us aware of how a certain appearance of silence, namely that of the Athenian demos in Thucydides' *History*, stand as forms of political participation. The demos, Zumbrunnen argues, is not 'simply a collection of those who might speak but don't', but rather is the subject of a 'collective silence' (2008, 8). The latter is a power of the demos. Thus understood, silence deserves attention in its own terms, that is not as the result of exclusion, neither as the result of engaged listening and yet nor as the expression of a 'tacit consent', and therefore of disempowerment or irrelevance. Rather, such a 'collective silence' ought to be seen as a form of meaningful power of the demos, one that blurs the established nexus of power between ordinary citizens and elites by intervening or even interrupting the rhetoric of the latter. Silence provides ordinary citizens with a means of resistance, at least to the degree that it renders them unknowable to their leaders. 'Keeping silent' is a way to resist mechanisms of power and project a collectivity which emerges to respond to a proclaimed injustice. |

[13]

In yet another work, Jungkurz (2012) explores the diverse ways in which silence can be mobilized and practiced democratically. He also points to the polysemy of silence by distinguishing between four 'in subordinate silences', each with a distinct function: empowerment, protest, resistance and refusal. Jungkurz classifies the silent event at UC Davis as 'silence that protests' and therefore as a 'powerful expression of dissent in social and political contexts where speech seems pervasive' (Jungkurz, 2012, 138). I concur with him that the silence at UC Davis profoundly challenges the pervasion of speech in political life. But I am also interested here in stressing the situational, tactical and critical nature of silent protest, as well as its force in forwarding a political message. Unlike the works of Jungkurz and Ferguson, this paper does not aim at offering a fine theoretical classification of appearances of silence in public life (they both fill in this gap in political thought compellingly); rather, like Zumbrunnen, I am interested in a very particular manifestation of silence: that as tactical and critical practice that proclaims injustice.

What all these theorists demonstrate is that silence is polysemic; it operates on different levels, degrees and dimensions. This is why, I propose, it is situational: its functions and effects can only be understood when placed in the wider context amidst which silence emerges.[14] As Norval observes, silence has many modalities and we should investigate each of them if we are to understand its political capacity (2007, 210). 'Keeping silent' as political activism is merely one among the many manifestations of silence in public life; to suggest that it is a tactical practice is to affirm it as embedded in the circumstances amidst which it rearranges and reconstitutes power relations. Against cynics who dismiss quiet forms of political enactment as lacking dynamism and thus as ineffective, a silent protest is a certain appearance of resistance and power; as such it can produce significant pragmatic effects, as the UC Davis case illustrates.<sup>iv</sup> [15] Democracy has a tactical dimension and indeed one that creates new subjectivities, spaces for action and power relations. Ultimately, this tactical dimension potentially disturbs established associations,

such as of political activism with particular forms of intervention, or of meaningful argumentation with utterance. A silent protest is neither denial of communication, as in the case of insubordinate silences (Dobson, 2014, 61), nor the absence of political argument.

### 'Keeping Silent' as Political Tactic

A[16] silent protest can be seen as a political tactic. However, the density, complexity and obscurity of silence, evidenced by the work of the thinkers discussed in the previous section, invites our attention to the wider context, to the events that frame a silent protest. In[17] other words, the polysemy of silence brings to our attention the *kairos*, the opportune time or the occasion amidst which a silent event emerges. 'Keeping silent', then, works as a particular response to an exigence: it is an embedded event that responds to a challenge. It is the particular circumstances, the *kairos*, that invite agents to choose to 'keep silent'.

To[18] attend to the *kairos* that frames the protest is to consider the power relations implicated in the event and the way the latter reconfigure them. Both Ferguson and Jungkurz discuss the multifaceted politics of silence, demonstrating not only how the silence of the powerful is different from that of the powerless, and therefore how empowering forms of silence differ from disempowering forms of silence, but also how certain appearances of silence function 'as one among other weapons of the weak' (Jungkurz, 2012, 135). I also affirm here silence as a weapon of the weak, but I follow a different theoretical trajectory to make this case, not least because I am also interested in the effects of this particular practice on the participants and on the *kairos*. Both are transformed through silence; 'keeping silent' as political tactic enters a reality and changes it.

Who[19] is to be understood as 'the weak'? Certainly, we need to distinguish between 'the weak' in the more enduring and historical sense and 'the weak' in the more fluid and highly contextual sense (Jungkurz, 2012, 135). The students at UC Davis are relatively privileged compared to, say, students at Garissa University in Kenya or young people who don't have access to tertiary education. Yet, in the particular context of the *kairos*, of the encounter under scrutiny, the students are identified with 'the weak' party, given their subordinated position in light of the presence of police forces that exercise physical violence, but also compared to the powerful institutional position of the Chancellor. The silent protest, though, disrupts this particular equilibrium of power and allows a reconfiguration of who is 'the weak'.

In the event at UC Davis, a person(ality) with institutional power is confronted by a demos, a collectivity of (anonymous) students with no formal power who, nonetheless, succeed in challenging the named person and the institutional power she embodies. At the same time, the students also challenge the attempt of those holding institutional power to present them as resentful and revengeful. The silent demos employed the tactic of 'keeping silent' in order to declare the double injustice made against them: the unfair treatment of the students by the campus police and the equally unfair attempt to attribute students a specific identity, to present them as a mob in a fury that is inclined towards violence. In other words, 'keeping silent' was employed in order to bring about change, a change in our perception of the students as being of a certain kind. The students established an alternative order: another 'partition of the sensible' (Rancière, 1999, 24).

The[20] silent protest not only responds directly to the *kairos* or the circumstances that invited it; it also enters and shapes this particular occasion. 'Keeping silent' can be a form of exercising power on an occasion. At UC Davis, the exigence was indeed modified, not only because the injustice was declared, Katehi was humiliated and compensation was attributed to the students. The situation was also modified in so far as the act of the

students gave rise to a new political subjectivity, a new (silent) demos. The event got the students noticed, as 'the part-taking that renders perceptible what had previously been insensible' (Panagia, 2009, 3). At the same time, it created a new audience, a recipient of the argument that the students invented; by 'keeping silent' the students invited their spectators to affirm them as peaceful, injured, yet powerful.

To choose to confront a seemingly strong part with silence is to employ a tactic. de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between two ways of operating, strategies and tactics. The concept of strategy refers to the manipulation of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated (de Certeau, 1984, 35-36). In other words, strategy refers to the action that takes place in a proper, delimited and fixed place and that depends on a certain and specific knowledge. Military or scientific activities are good examples here. By contrast, 'a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus' (de Certeau, 1984, 36-37). It is the action that takes place in a terrain that already belongs to and is organized by another power (subject, institution, natural force etc). Whereas strategies privilege spatial relationships which enable the capitalization of already acquired advantages, tactics utilize the current, the opportunities of the moment to take the opponent by surprise.

This<sup>[21]</sup> is a formulation that relates to the event under scrutiny, but also to expressions of political discontent more generally, for at least two reasons. First, this distinction helps us to understand how participants in such practices exploit time, *kairos* and the opportunities for action offered in it, instead of seeking to localize or circumscribe political action. In doing so, it also exposes the fluid nature of the demos, its dependence on *kairos*; a demos can be formed and reformed when the circumstances call it. Hence the effectiveness of such tactical practices is contingent, it remains depended on the *kairos*; not all silent protests generate identical effects. <sup>[22]</sup>Second, the distinction between tactics and strategies explains why and how tactic as way of operation is most appropriate to the

weak part (de Certeau, 1984, 37). In the context of political activism 'the weak' can be affirmed as those who can not make use of institutional frameworks or formal schemas, either because they do not have access to them, or because they find these insufficient for their aims.[23] Rather than acting based on a planned, general strategy, a tactic allows one to operate in isolated actions. Similar to the logic of an insurgency, a tactic does not have a plan; it is the plan, in the sense that it is meaningful regardless of its aims and proposals (Arditi, 2012).

A protest in the form of 'keeping silent' is a tactic in a dual sense. First, in the sense that it is an action that is performed in a non-proper locus, that is a locus that is already determined by an exterior power which the agents of silence cannot control. The tactic of silence is exercised, it is performed, in a territory that is managed by an institution (in the case under discussion the University) and is under surveillance by its forces (the campus police). The purpose of the tactic is not to acquire the control of the territory, but to achieve an unexpected blow, a move that is not already anticipated. As[24] such, 'keeping silent' as a choice of political activism can be tactical in another sense; that of being the art of the weak party, of the party that deploys its power in the territory established by another party (de Certeau, 1984, 40). In this sense it is a trick, an artifice employed by those who wish to declare a demand to those in a higher rank, but at the same time they seek to do so while challenging the very mechanisms that these subjects accept, sustain and reproduce. Silence as political tactic is a means to startle a political opponent but also to challenge institutional power using a form of civil protest. Its effectiveness remains always dependent on the particular occasion in which it is employed and which it addresses and transforms. Silence as political tactic has certain limits. [25]

Tactical Silence as Critical Practice

Tactical silence in political life is a critical practice, in the sense that it is a pattern of political engagement that manifests an alternative possibility of being and acting. It is a practice that molds political subjectivity, whereas it functions as exemplary to others. I draw this understanding of critical practice from Norval (2011, 218). A critical practice is one that makes one intelligible both to oneself and to others, while being irreducible either to reason-giving or to moral reasoning. By contrast, a critical practice is an embodied practice that involves 'staging, conveying and manifesting for another a way of life, which exceeds as well as precedes (although it may include) argument and conversation' (Norval, 2011, 213). That said, even though these latter modes of engagement may well serve the purposes of manifestation and provocation, they do not exhaust the possibilities of staging a political demand or of embodying the forms of political subjectification. *Logos*, speech acts and argumentation are not enough to perform these functions.

Like the practices that Norval addresses in her work, namely *parrēsia* and 'turning', 'keeping silent' is also a critical practice in that it can 'draw the self to further selves, empowering subjects both to act differently and to imagine alternative worlds' (Norval, 2011, 222). An essential aspect of these processes is the manifestation of these alternative ways of acting for others. However, manifesting alternatives for another in the case of 'keeping silent' is not to be understood in the sense of instruction and is therefore less closer to the function of 'turning' and closer to that of *parrēsia* (Norval, 2011, 218-221). That said, 'keeping silent' in political life is not a pedagogical process that aims to teach or enchain someone (in this case Katehi); rather, it is a non-verbal ritual, a mode of proclaiming an injustice by someone weak to the powerful person who committed it (Foucault, 2010, 133). Tactical silence is a (paradoxical) mode of addressing one, of speaking freely to someone in power. In this sense, silence can be ultimately violent; not just because like *parrēsia* it says something in a peremptory and definitive way (Foucault, 2010, 54), provoking and disturbing, but also because it denotes contempt, disdain to the

opponent. It violates one's authority by contempting it in a manner that cannot be penalized or directly confronted, unless in an authoritative way: by using more violence.

[26]

Tactical[27] silence is also a critical practice in a second sense. It is a form of operation developed by a fleeting subjectivity, rather than a crystallized manner of political behaving or a solid political identity; there are limits to the act of 'keeping silent'. The reason is that if 'keeping silent' becomes crystallized or solidified as practice it runs the risk of losing its ability to speak, to transmit messages. It ceases being disruptive and transformative and becomes part of the routinized everydayness it seeks to challenge. Silence is not lethargy but it can become such.

Neither is silence political in itself. But it has political potentiality, when as form of operating enables a subjective to be responsive to the current, to *kairos*. Foucault (2007, 42) argues that the essence of critique is not saying that things - 'what exists', 'what one knows', 'what one does' - are not right as they are; rather, it is a matter of questioning our own knowledge and its limits (2007, 49). In the context discussed here, the choice to 'keep silent' as political activism is a way of acting critically, that is a way of challenging our accepted assumptions, grids of knowledge and power and therefore modes of thought; it is a way of questioning the 'mechanisms of different types of coercion' in effect (Foucault, 2007, 59). Critical silence transcends established manners of political conduct, expands the horizon of political activism and rearranges power relations, by manifesting neglected, unexpected and previously unexamined forms of political engagement.

### 'Keeping Silent' as Democratic Activism

Silence functions constitutively (Ferguson, 2003, 58). In the fitting occasion it can function to unite a heterogenous constituency around a fugitive commonality, thus constituting it as political subject, as demos. As a tactic it does not necessarily aim to disrupt everyday life in

the way that a massive demonstration blocks traffic or alters city life; yet it revitalizes and transforms it by disrupting one's senses. Thus understood, the modality of silence discussed here is not the outcome of mechanisms of silencing, such as censorship or exclusion; it is not to be perceived as disempowerment (Ferguson, 2003; Jungkurz, 2012).<sup>[28]</sup> Rather, as tactical and critical practice 'keeping silent' is a deliberate political choice that aims to address a particular occasion by transforming it. The students at UC Davis did not just sit on the quad, remaining speechless because they had no words to say while the Chancellor was passing by. They chose to keep silent because they saw in silence a way of addressing her: an alternative mode of political engagement. They saw in 'keeping silent' a way to startle their political opponent by acting in a surprising, unexpected manner. This experience comes to disturb the prevailing assumption that the means to attain freedom through political participation is voice.<sup>v</sup>

'Keeping silent' as a form of civil protest does not bear the element of defense; this is not the kind of silence that one keeps in order to attend carefully to something or someone, like the demos in ancient Athens (Zumbrunnen, 2008). The silence of the students at UC Davis does not insinuate patience and consideration; it is demanding and dynamic. This emergent demos has already heard enough; its silence is its own way to be heard. This is not to neglect the relation between listening and silence; silence functions necessarily as a prerequisite for voice, for being heard. However, the modality of silence visited here is characterized more by intrusiveness, even ferocity, rather than by attentiveness.

The mute power of tactical silence is illustrated in a story that draws on the well-known myth of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens. The hero asks his crew to plug their ears with wax and bind him to the mast so that he could be exposed to and indulge in their song, yet not succumb to it. Kafka offers us a subversive reading of the myth, one where the central figure is no longer Odysseus but the Sirens. He writes: 'the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing

never happened, it is still conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never' (Kafka, 1995, 430-1). In Kafka's reading of the myth, the Sirens decide not to give their voice and thus to surprise their opponent by doing the unexpected, the unpredictable. It is not their weakness that urges them to do so, but their intention to explicate an alternative yet equally powerful mode of action. The Sirens used their silence to startle their enemy, like the students startled Katehi. There is an appealing, almost magnetic, quality in silence.

As this illustration further suggests, to take action and intervene in order to alter a situation does not necessarily entail the use of noise or voice. Their absence can also be effective, in so far as one capitalizes upon the situation, takes advantage of the occasion, exploits and channels it to the benefit of the cause she supports. In choosing silence over utterance or noise, the students at UC Davis didn't choose to turn their back to injustice; rather, they chose to provoke the source of injustice in the most disturbing and irritating way, like the student provokes the teacher when the latter demands an explanation that never comes. The receivers of silence who interpret it as a sign of resignation and weakness and thus as favoring themselves, experience even more surprisingly the shocking tactics of silence: it is a powerful weapon that cannot be fought, since there is nothing to fight. 'Keeping silent' as political activism is an embedded political choice: [previous\[29\]](#) experience of injustice, old grievances and traumas participate in this ear-piercingly quiet outburst. Yet, it remains pertinent to the particular occasion, which it seeks to address in the most powerful, disturbing way, since the wax is not enough to help one avoid it.

### Disturbing Binaries

Silence is eloquent, at least in the sense that it provides a mode of communication and significance (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 188). At the same time, its paradoxical and ambiguous nature blurs the way we understand and receive, unless it is placed in the context of the

silence/voice binary. John Cage (1961, 8) narrates his experience in an anechoic chamber, where although he is supposed to be exposed to pure silence, he could still hear the sounds of his nervous system and the circulation of his blood; there is no such a thing as pure silence. When the students at UC Davis proclaimed an injustice by employing the tactic of 'keeping silent', they conveyed an argument without finding recourse to voice. Not that the aural element is absent during the event; the sound of the flash bulbs and of the heels of the Chancellor on the pavement participate in the aesthetic formation of the scene. Yet, these sounds underline an otherwise quiet moment and they make it even more powerful through a contrast of the absence of speech and the reign of other sounds. The impossibility of pure silence strengthens, rather than downplays, its eloquent character.

The tactic of 'keeping silent' comes to problematize our understanding of silence explicitly within the grid of the binary logic of silence/voice. The silent subject does not utter. Yet, she expresses contempt, proclaims an injustice, forwards a demand. The fact that silence does not articulate entails that it remains open to different meanings and interpretations; a silent event is multilayered. But as Glenn (2004, 4) puts it, silence is an absence with a function. Silence and eloquence are interwoven.

That silence is intertwined with speech is indicative of the complexity of the social and political world. By attending to this complexity and therefore to the fact that the components of dualisms such as silence/speech are not exclusionary of each other, but intermeshed, we also become attentive to the interlayered nature of democratic activism. Nietzsche (1966) demonstrates how the 'opposition of values' is merely an estimate or provisional perspective and he questions even the existence of opposites. He, thus, urges us to avoid placing the components of dualisms into an axiological relation that would end up at the exclusion of one over the other; instead, he suggests we ought to perceive them as participating in a complex relation of operating differences, a relation which they inform, shape and redefine. They participate in an expanding relation of inclusion rather than exclusion. Silence is

interwoven with language. It may be its prerequisite, by enveloping language, making it possible (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, 176), but it is not its opposite. Speech does not exclude silence; the latter already includes the former.

One should not be over-optimistic with regard to the effect of disturbing binaries: the fact that it is possible to downplay their significance by redefining the relation between their components does not entail that it is possible to abandon binaries altogether. Deleuze (2007, 34) reminds us that binaries are inevitable because 'they are already in language'. The question, therefore, is not how we 'get rid of them' but rather how we 'fight against' binaries by making language 'flow between' them. Deleuze points to the technique of stammering as one way of fighting against binaries. By inserting new elements, even repetitive ones, we can disrupt a flow and give room for emergence of new constituents, and therefore of new possibilities of being and acting. 'Keeping silent' functions in a similar way, in so far as it is a way to break a certain flow – the flow of our perception of political argumentation and participation as associated with speech – and to give rise to a new possibility of 'being politically'. A being that does not utter, yet proclaims, demands and attains.

In [30] a similar vein, one should not overestimate the productive forces of 'keeping silent', either. As a tactic, it does not have the transformative power of, say, a total revolution; neoliberalism could not be fought against by deploying a silent protest. Yet, by breaking the logic of binary thinking, it is a practice that softens one's understanding of political activism, enabling a deeper affirmation of what counts as meaningful and effective political practice. In this way, it broadens one's understanding of democracy itself, as that form of politics that is always in emergence, responding to everyday emergencies of maintenance (Honig, 2009, xvii). Democracy is reduced neither to radical 'events' nor to what can be called 'everyday politics'; such a crude dichotomization invalidates our appreciation of the ordinariness folded in politics. After all, as Norval puts it, 'not all novelty is a radical break, neither is all tradition

a mere repetition of the same' (2007, 12). Democracy and activism are open, complex and ongoing processes.

The silent subject is merely one among diverse possible forms of political subjectivity. Although it disturbs the prevailing equation of democratic subjectivity with the speaking subject, manifesting an alternative way of acting and challenging established power relations, it is an appearance of political agency that acquires its meaningfulness from *kairos*, from the particular occasion. And it does so to the degree that it can function to provoke, question and even startle a political opponent with more power, opening thus a space for political intervention where previously there seemed to be an impasse.

## Conclusions

The proliferation of means of political participation and activism that we experience in the 21st century suggests that the politics of choice replaces the politics of loyalties (Norris, 2002: 4). This paper made the case for 'keeping silent' as one choice of political action among others, acknowledging also its limits. Silence is here defended as tactic, rather than as crystallized pattern of behavior. Hence the affirmation of its situational character.

Events such as the one that took place at UC Davis help us affirm the complexity and richness of political life. They allow us to receive less predictable encounters as meaningful forms of political intervention. The silent event under scrutiny exemplifies the argument that to 'keep silent' does not always come as the result of a process of 'being silenced'; those who 'keep silent' are not necessarily disempowered, inaudible or invisible. They are neither apathetic nor ignorant; the students at UC Davis chose to be silent because they perceived their refusal to utter as a means to express disapproval or disavowal of a political decision made against them by those having a form of power that the students didn't have access to. 'Keeping silent' is not a practice of despair or the last recourse of those who feel otherwise weakened and ready to quit; it is a choice not of those who believe that they have nothing

to say, but of those who find in this practice a way to bring about change. It is a tactic employed by those who want not only to demand something from those in a higher rank, but who also want to challenge the very mechanisms that these pundits accept and use.

Silence functions at different layers; yet, there is always something that remains imperceptible in the meaning of silence. It is multifarious and polysemic, and therefore too fleeting to fully grasp its denotations. It acquires its meaningfulness from *kairos*, from the particular circumstances amidst which it is employed. As political tactic, it does not merely create new channels for argumentation; it also shows how these need not be reduced to verbal forms of communication. As such, silent political activism raises awareness of political injustices, stimulates political thinking and invites a broadening of political sensitivities. As critical practice, 'keeping silent' enriches the possible forms of political subjectification, thus expanding the horizon of political participation to those who find in language inadequate a means to proclaim political demands. In this sense, 'keeping silent' is a way of creating and winning new audiences for political claims. It is a way of acting upon one's perception.

Silent political activism deserves our attention, not because it carries hidden messages that need to be decrypted, but because it exposes in the most profound and disturbing way the pervasiveness of injustice in human societies. By inviting new political audiences, it creates new political bodies and challenges established power mechanisms, in ways that are disturbing, yet remain difficult to be challenged back.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> The event quickly went viral and can be watched on popular sites like YouTube

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmfluKelOt4>) and Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com/60599729>).

<sup>ii</sup> This is one dimension presented in several blogs, for example

<http://thesecondalarm.com/2011/11/20/ucdavis-chancellor-video/>

<sup>iii</sup> The diverse network of the Women In Black, with its members occasionally organizing silent protests or vigils, would be a notable example here. 'Women in Black is a world-wide network of women committed to peace with justice and actively opposed to injustice, war, militarism and other forms of violence', from the movement's official website <http://www.womeninblack.org>. **See also Göker (2011) who offers a gendered analysis of the silent vigils organized by mothers of Turkey every Saturday.**

<sup>iv</sup> Following the students' protest, the judicial settlement of the pepper-spray case ordered that victims should receive \$1 million compensation, whereas Katehi herself was asked to provide written apology.

<sup>v</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between freedom and silence from a Foucauldian perspective see Wendy Brown (2005) 'Freedom's silences', in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 83-97.

## References

- Arditi, B. (2012) Insurgencies don't have a plan -they *are* the plan: Political performatives and vanishing mediators in 2011, *Journal of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* 1(1), available at [cf.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/1-june2012/arditi\\_insurgencies.pdf](http://cf.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/1-june2012/arditi_insurgencies.pdf)
- Brown, W. (2005) *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cage, J. (1961) *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Caster, P. (2004) Staging prisons: Performance, activism, and social bodies, *The Drama Review* 48(3), pp. 107-116.
- Cherkis, J. (2011) 'UC Davis police pepper-spray seated students In Occupy dispute'. *Huffington Post* November 19, 2011, accessed March 1, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/19/uc-davis-police-pepper-spray-students\\_n\\_1102728.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/19/uc-davis-police-pepper-spray-students_n_1102728.html)
- de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Della Porta, D. and Diani M. (2006) *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Patton. London: The Athlone Press.
- Deleuze G. (2007) *Dialogues II*, trans. C. Parnet. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans, B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Delicath, J.W. and Deluca, K.M. (2003), Image events, the public sphere, and argumentative practice: The case of radical environmental groups, *Argumentation* 17(3), pp. 315-33.
- Dobson, A. (2014) *Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.[31]
- Dryzek, J. (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. New York: Oxford University Press. |
- [32]
- Ferguson, K. (2003) Silence: A politics, *Contemporary Political Theory* 2(1), pp. 49-65.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2007) What is critique?', in S. Lotringer (ed.), L. Hochroth and C.Porter (trans.) *The Politics of Truth*, Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. (2010) *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the College de France 1982-1983*, G. Burchell (trans.) and F. Gros (ed.) Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Glenn, C. (2004) *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Göker, Z. (2011) 'Presence in Silence: Feminist and Democratic Implications of the Saturday Vigils in Turkey', in J. Beinin and F. Vairel (eds.) *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

[33]

Habermas, J. (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action*. London: Polity Press.

[34]

Habermas, J. (1998) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg, Cambridge: MA: MIT University Press.

[35]

Horowitz, A. (2013) 'Linda Katehi, UC Davis Chancellor, confronted by students', Huffington Post November 20, 2011, accessed March 1, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/20/linda-katehi-uc-davis\\_n\\_1103916.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/20/linda-katehi-uc-davis_n_1103916.html).

Honig, B. (2009) *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jungkurz, V. (2012) The promise of democratic silences, *New Political Science* 34(2): pp. 127–150.

[36]

Kafka, F. (1995) The silence of the sirens, in *The Complete Stories*, New York: Schocken Books.

Lichtenfels, P. and Rouse, J. (2013) *Performance, Politics and Activism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Madison, D.S. (2010) *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, London and New York: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1969), *The Visible and the Invisible*, C. Lefort (ed.) and A. Lingis (trans.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1966) *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books.

- Nietzsche, F. (2006) On truth and lies in a nonmoral sense, in K.A.Pearson and D.Large (eds), *The Nietzsche Reader*, pp. 114-123. Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell.
- Norris, P. (2002) *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Norval, A.J. (2011) Moral perfectionism and democratic responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault, *Ethics and Global Politics* 4(4): pp. 207-229.
- Norval, A. J. (2007) *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Panagia, D. (2009) *The Political Life of Sensation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rancière, J. (2009) *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. G. Elliott, London: Verso.
- Tannen, D. and Seville-Troike, M. (eds.) (1985) *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Thoreau, H.D. (1962) *Journal*, Toronto: Dover Publications Inc.
- Whitehead, K.A. and Bowman, B. (2012) The professional consequences of political silence, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 43(4), pp. 426-435.
- Wolin, S.S. (2008) *Democracy Inc: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford.
- Young, I.M. (1996) 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy', in S. Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [37]
- Zumbrunnen, J. (2008) *Silence and Democracy: Athenian Politics in Thucydides' History*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.