



A Theory Workshop, hosted by the Department of Educational Studies

Democratic Decline and Diversity: The Us vs. the Us's

Barbara Arneil, Professor, Department of Political Science
Monday, February 4th from 4:00 PM- 6:00 PM
Ponderosa Annex G Lounge
Light refreshments will be served.

In the last 20 years, the idea that democracy and the social realm are under threat of decline or collapse has been a central theme in academic literature and political analysis. In this talk I will explore the meaning of democratic decline and its relationship to multiculturalism and diversity. Using the twin notions of participation and trust as two key measures of social and democratic decline, I argue that participation has not so much declined over the last 40 years (as Robert Putnam has famously argued in his book *Bowling Alone*) as changed because of what I call the politics of the us's—groups historically oppressed (including women, ethnic and racialized minorities and gay, lesbian and disabled citizens) who have created new kinds of advocacy organizations in order to change the norms of civil society itself. I also argue that such changes (while often perceived as negative in relation to a transcendent “us”) are positive to the extent that they have made society more inclusive, respectful of diversity and just.

Trust, on the other hand, *has* declined but, I argue, this is due to the politics of diversity as the us's fought for change and other groups responded by defending traditional norms and values, often in the name of a transcendental us, creating a vicious circle of distrust as each side feels betrayed by the other's victories. Thus, I conclude, to understand social decline, in terms of participation and trust, we must pay attention not only to the us but also to the us's in civil society. The tendency, therefore, to champion a transcendent us in order to reverse social decline, as many scholars and politicians seem prone to do in recent years, not only ignores the us's but may foreclose on their hope for a future free from discrimination and hate.

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Arneil, B. (2010). Gender, diversity and organizational change: The Boy Scouts vs. Girl Scouts of America. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(1), 53-68.

Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78.

Putnam, R. (2007). *E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and community in the 20th century: The 2006 John Skytte Prize Lecture. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30(2), 137-173.

In the Theory Workshops Master's and PhD students can engage with faculty about ways they have integrated theory into their research and praxis. The Workshops help students to consider a broader conception of theory across disciplines and areas of research, and to feel more comfortable considering the relevance of theory to their own work.

Contact Autumn at alk1959@interchange.ubc.ca to RSVP or Jo-Anne Dillabough at jo-anne.dillabouth@ubc.ca