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Roumen Dimitrov - *Strategic Silence: Public Relations and Indirect Communication*, Oxon: Routledge, 2018, (pp. 241) ISBN 978-1-138-10003-9 (hbk)

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In the field of public relations, and pretty much everywhere else, there has been silence about silence. As Roumen Dimitrov argues in his important new book, when reflected upon, silence tends to get a bad rap: silence, after all, consents to the wicked thing; silence whispers of the covert, the nefarious. We are to break silences, not intensify them. But public relations, in many ways, is very much about silence – and strategic public relations is *always* about silence. Here, in *Strategic Silence*, Dimitrov breaks a long silence about silence as an indirect, asymmetric, and devastatingly powerful strategic force.

Bookended by an introduction and conclusion (Parts I and VII, respectively) , *Strategic Silence* falls into five sections: Part II examines the western, positivist tradition – with a focus on why that tradition shuts silences down; Part III, I think the most engaging component of the book, draws on the work of Foucault, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and others in order to establish deep-set connections between silence and strategy; Part IV, the most *novel* part of *Strategic Silence*, proposes a ladder-like model of indirectness that allows the author to reach valuable conclusions about the connection between indirectness and impact; Part V more or less interrogates a range of silences against the rungs on the ladder model; while Part VI attempts to offer a perspective on silence said to be beyond strategy.

I do not propose to slavishly traverse each of the book's sections, but address what I believe to be Dimitrov's key findings. In so doing, and as hinted at above, I highlight two really significant contributions made to the field of public relations and, arguably more importantly, to the study of strategy more generally. For this reason, and in the context of this *brief* review, I pass over Part II and move immediately to Part III (chapters 4 and 5) where Dimitrov examines strategy as discursive practice and as a means of mobilising symbolic power. As noted above, this is, I think, the part of the book that fearlessly treads new ground – at least in terms of public relations research. What Dimitrov does in this section of his book is confront certain realities of strategic design. As Antulio Echevarria (2017) notes in his slight (but excellent) introduction to military strategy, more broadly considered, strategy may be thought of as an intellectual architecture that gives coherent shape to one's efforts. This observation positions strategy in an abstract space and, to the delight of this reader, Dimitrov begins to unpack the essential character of strategy as a discursive and profoundly abstract phenomenon. In so doing, he eloquently distinguishes between strategy and tactics, and considers silence (a mechanism, if you like, of strategy) as a means of either reinforcing or undermining power. Channelling Michel Foucault, and this is a crucial point, Dimitrov observes that strategy's success lies in its invisibility (that is, in its silence) – that its power is proportional to its ability to conceal its mechanisms. It is here that Dimitrov rightly argues that at its most impactful, strategy enshrouds: 'power works best when it is hidden', the author writes. In the context of the discipline of public relations, this is a bold, provocative, and well-defended positioning. Few public relations scholars, if any, square up to the essential character of strategic dynamics in this (appropriately) uncompromising way. In a piece in preparation I argue that, in a very essential sense, strategy *inevitably* conceals – if not deceives.

In the middle sections of his book, Dimitrov closes in on an examination of specific and implied silences. Of particular interest here is his work on presence and absence – the inarticulate voices that shout loudly from the interstices of textual or linguistic otherness. Without drawing extensively on Derrida, Dimitrov effectively argues that *trace* – what Nietzsche has argued is accessible through the unconscious – unveils silences. To use Derrida's own lexicon from *Margins of Philosophy* (1984), the idea of trace speaks to a 'breaching', a breaking open of, and a giving of voice to, silences. While I would have liked Dimitrov to have further

pursued this nascent line of inquiry, the very fact that he has (seriously) opened it in the context of public relations discourse is significant. A closely-related point is made when, in a footnote to Chapter 6, Dimitrov ironically buries (almost makes silent!) an important observation by Bakhtin. Having briefly discussed Bakhtin's notion of the *chronotope*, a footnote observes that 'silence falls victim to [a] metaphorical reduction in phrases such as 'zone of silence', 'grave of silence', 'void of silence', and 'temples of silence' (p. 79).' The point is important because, as Dimitrov notes, these largely spatial metaphors need to be unpacked (or deconstructed) so that crucial time-space dynamics might be revealed. In this sense, in order to interrogate closely specific spaces in which silences inhere as a mechanism of power, a veil has to be lifted on the concept of silence itself – which is a rather tautological (and metaphorical) way of saying that in order to talk about silence, one has to free it – yet not entirely wrench it away from – the clichés that tend to silence it. But this demands a nuanced approach since, as Paul Ricœur has argued in *The Rule of Metaphor* (2003), 'metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality'.

I conclude this brief review (a longer version is in preparation) by drawing attention to Dimitrov's ladder of indirectness. As noted at the outset, this is, in my view, the most *novel* part of *Strategic Silence*. Having established that public relations engages the abstract mechanism of silence as a means of 'talking' (one might add, as a mode of power), the author observes that silence inheres in any form of indirect communication; that silence is, in this sense, to be considered a structural phenomenon. What Dimitrov's model suggests is that while there are no specific 'levels of indirectness *per se*', there are, nonetheless, paired modes of silence – each pairing, in some sense, contingent on previous pairings. As Dimitrov puts it, the ladder acts as a sort of algorithm that takes one from communicative and non-communicative silences (these at the base of the ladder) to the most implicit and explicit of silences (at the top of the ladder). The model is helpful because it assists the reader to step through from the most straightforward of silences (*communicative silence*, for instance, is said to manifest – if one can say that – in contexts recognised by all participants) to the most abstract of silences (which, if we follow the left-hand-side of the ladder, is represented by *implicit silence*; the silence of 'indirect discourse': the unsaid said). Here, and again channelling Foucault – along with Bakhtin, Volosinov, and others, Dimitrov acknowledges that implicit silence speaks through what may be said to be governing paradigms of 'structure, history, and culture'.

So, breaking new ground, as it does, *Strategic Silence* is an important new book. I have today recommended it to an honours student who proposes a dissertation on the silent strategies framed and engaged by those behind the phenomenon of the 'online review'. The book is already on my highly recommended list for my undergraduate course 'Communication Strategies' and likewise appears on my reading list for my postgraduate course 'Critical Perspectives in Communication'. *Strategic Silence* deserves to, and ought to, sell very well.

References

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About the reviewer

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