

## PUBLIC PARK as METAPHOR

No single metaphor can perfectly encapsulate the ideal of a diverse democracy. But to be helpful, it must, unlike the melting pot, recognize that different citizens have a right to lead their lives in accordance with the dictates of their own tastes. At the same time, it should, unlike the salad bowl, inspire the creation of a common space in which people from different walks of life have meaningful opportunities to interact and cooperate.

Simple though it might be, the image of a public park accomplishes both of those things—and three of its features are especially useful in thinking through what kind of society diverse democracies should build.

1. *A public park is open to everyone.* Parks allow visitors to do things on their own, to congregate in likeminded groups, or to pursue joint activities with complete strangers. And though the presumption isn't that everyone who uses them shares a common purpose, they provide a wonderful venue for those who do to meet one another and persuade strangers to join their group.

Similarly, diverse democracies must ensure that nobody suffers from pervasive discrimination or enmity on the basis of their ascriptive identity. This also means that they must allow all their members to use public spaces—or build private structures—on the same terms. Just as a park is for everyone, so a diverse society needs to treat members of every race and religion with equal respect and dignity.

2. *A public park gives its visitors options.* Visitors pursue a huge variety of legitimate activities in parks. They run or walk, read or talk, play sports or share food.

That great variety is a very good thing. But for a park to remain safe and attractive, its visitors need to afford one another the same rights and freedoms they themselves wish to enjoy. You cannot rob somebody, force them to play baseball because you happen to dislike soccer, or tell them what food they must consume. And if somebody breaks those rules, everybody needs to know that they can quickly count on assistance.

Similarly, in diverse democracies, all citizens should be free to lead their lives in accordance with their own views and values. They can be religious or secular, prioritize family or business, and watch TV or go to the gym.

But diverse democracies must also ensure that some citizens don't start to harm others, to intimidate people they dislike on account of their opinion or their identity, or to control those who happen to be born into their own communities. Just as a park needs to have rules to ensure that its patrons can choose whether to interact or do their own thing, so liberal democracies need to offer their citizens freedom from both the oppression of the state and the coercion that might be imposed on them by their elders.

3. *A public park creates a vibrant space for encounter.* When I visited Prospect Park, it always felt vibrant, beautiful, and astoundingly safe. But there are lots of parks in the world that are dangerous, poorly maintained, or eerily empty.

As is the case with most aesthetic judgments, we won't always agree about which park is better or what kinds of attributes it should have. Some people like wide open spaces; others prefer wooded areas that look a little wild. Some love the hustle and bustle of a lawn that attracts hundreds of revelers on a hot summer day; others prefer winding paths that allow them to get lost in solitude.

These aesthetic judgments will, in turn, drive our views on important matters concerning the park. It should be beyond dispute that it is wrong to exclude some citizens from public parks on the basis of the color of their skin. But other questions are subject to legitimate disagreement. Based on our different values and preferences, we might argue for a more manicured or a more natural layout and seek to impose stricter or more lenient limits on how much noise each person is allowed to make.

Just as there are legitimate disagreements over what kinds of rules or architectural features make a park especially attractive, so too there are legitimate differences over what kinds of norms and habits are likely to create the most thriving diverse democracies.

Some people want to impose one strict set of rules and cultural norms on all citizens. Others are seemingly giving up on the hope that members of different groups could ever see one another as friends and allies rather than competitors or even enemies. I disagree with both. My own hope for the future of diverse democracies is that they will have many of the features that made me fall in love with Prospect Park. They should be bustling yet peaceful and heterogeneous without being fragmented.

Most important, I hope that they will create lots of space for the kinds of chance encounters that public spaces can, at their best, facilitate. While each person will retain the liberty to stay within the confines of their own group or community, many people would, on that vision, recognize how much they have in common with those compatriots of theirs who do not, at first blush, look or sound anything like them.

The best kinds of public spaces allow each person to do their own thing while facilitating unexpected encounters that could lead to lasting connections. Similarly, the kind of diverse democracy we should build must maintain respect for communities that prefer to stay among themselves yet encourage a majority of citizens to embark on a life that is, to some meaningful extent, shared.

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