Discussion Questions

Demagoguery and Democracy

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1. On page 37, Dr. Patricia Roberts-Miller defines the genetic fallacy: when “social group membership suffices as proof.” How do you use social groups you belong to as proof for your arguments? Do you use the identities of others to warrant or deny their claims?

2. Dr. Roberts-Miller notes that one way to combat demagoguery is to “just bear witness to the glory of diversity and pluralism” (99). Have you witnessed this glory? What persuasive stories might you tell to combat demagogic culture?

3. Dr. Roberts-Miller asserts that “democracy depends on rhetoric” (13). How is rhetoric vital to democracy? What are good rhetorical practices, according to the author?

4. Scholars like Michael Morrell in Empathy and Democracy make the case that we need to practice greater empathy with those we disagree with in order to promote a healthier democracy. Others like Paul Bloom in Against Empathy argue that we need to use reason over emotion and empathy to strengthen our democracy. Take a position where you defend the practice of empathy, reason, or a combination of both as integral to democratic practice. Be sure to prepare an example to support your position.

5. Read Jesse Singal’s April 7, 2019 article in The Atlantic, entitled, “The New Science of How to Argue—Constructively.” Singal discusses the development of a new research area entitled, “erisology.” Erisology represents the “study of disagreement” when agreement is unlikely in moments of deep-seated conflict. Do you believe that the agreements we face politically are so deep-seated that we need a new area of scholarship to understand the science of disagreement?

6. Rhetorical scholars have historically theorized the importance of “harmony” to public argument. The mission of harmony is to achieve a “harmony of opposites” or “unified diversity,” which pushes back against this idea of studying intractable disagreements. Those committed to harmony presume that those who disagree will continue to discuss
and debate issues until they achieve some level of unity through a diversity of positions. Another way to think about harmony is to consider Aristotle’s (and other ancient philosophers’) turn to “dialectical” argument where people who disagree use reasoned argument, ask questions of one another, and answer those questions as a means of seeking common ground. Can you think of any public arguments where rhetorical harmony has been achieved? Also, consider putting Aristotle’s idea of dialectical argument into practice by working through an issue with someone you disagree with by asking questions of one another until you find such common ground.

7. Review sample speeches on UMD’s Voices of Democracy: U.S. Oratory Project website: https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/. Identify a speech that meets Dr. Roberts-Miller’s definition of democracy and one that meets her definition of demagoguery.

8. Some scholars conceive of citizenship through a “friendship” model. The assumption is that we need to see one another as “friends” in order to achieve the sense of community required to advance the public good. Others conceive of citizenship through a “stranger” lens, which, for some, helps explain why we have a hard time building community because we are surrounded by strangers who we often view suspiciously and rarely engage. Elizabeth Bernstein of the Wall Street Journal provides a different interpretation of “strangers” in an article entitled, “The Surprising Boost You Get From Strangers,” from May 11, 2019. Write a two to three page think piece where you defend a position on citizenship. Do you find the friendship model the most productive? Or, drawing from Bernstein’s article, how might a “stranger” model of citizenship actually enrich democracy?

9. Historically, political leaders were expected to express proper decorum in public life. Proper decorum meant they needed to use reasoned argument, use proper language, avoid character attacks against others, avoid exposing the private lives of public figures, maintain a calm demeanor and prevent public outbursts, keep proper distance from others, and refrain from gossip. Some argue that too many public leaders no longer act decorously. How important is decorous behavior to democratic life? Do you believe we should still expect our leaders to practice proper decorous behavior or reject such precepts because they were designed by people in power to control the behavior of those who lack it?

10. Dr. Roberts-Miller ends her book about asking, “What Do We Do?” Read the chapter and assess the effectiveness of the author’s suggestions for countering demagogic behavior.
Work in small groups and brainstorm additional ways that we can help promote more democratic communication patterns and combat demagogic arguments.