

# 1 Silent voices and everyday critics: problems in political theory, solutions from Third World feminist social criticism

When you live in the water, you don't argue with the crocodiles.

*(Bengali proverb)*

## Prologue

In Bangladesh in September of 1993, I accompanied a group of rural women from Tangail who were members of Save the Children women's groups on their visit with rural women of Kustia who were members of Soptagram women's savings groups.<sup>1</sup> On the afternoon of the third day, as we walked from a workshop on women's legal rights to a meeting between the women's groups, we heard shrieks of terror coming from a household compound on the other side of a rice field. "What's going on?" I asked. Sahara, a Tangail woman, turned to me with anger and a memory of terror in her eyes and hit her right fist into her cupped left hand. She had experienced domestic violence and recognized the sounds from across the field.

After a time, Sahara asked, "Do husbands beat their wives in your country?" "Some do," I answered, "even though it is illegal." We all laughed at the irony, having just learned about women's formal legal rights in Bangladesh and noting how they differed from local practice.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Save the Children is a US-based international nongovernment organization (NGO) operating in Bangladesh; Soptagram is a Bangladeshi NGO operating in the western portion of the country primarily in Kustia. Tangail and Kustia are two *thanas*, a regional designation with the approximate political function of a county in the United States. Tangail is in the center of the country near the capital, Dhaka; Kustia is on the western border with India. Most of the women on the trip had never been outside their *thana*.

<sup>2</sup> As a result of women's activism in the late '70s against all forms of violence against women, but especially dowry-related beatings and death, Bangladesh passed laws protecting women (Jahan 1995). These include the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1979, the Cruelty to Women Punishment Ordinance of 1983, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1984 (making marriage illegal for girls under the age of 18 and for boys under 21), the Illegal Trafficking of Women Act of 1988 and the Family Court Ordinance of 1985. These laws are regularly violated in social practices. For example, although national statistics are unavailable, it is generally confirmed in local studies that dowry is now paid in nearly all Hindu and Muslim marriages. When the law was passed, generally Hindus

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“Why do men hit their wives?” I asked. “Because they had a bad day. Because they are poor,” answered Sahara. “Because the rice is too hot, or there is not enough rice,” said Apfza, a woman from Kustia. Then she added, “A good husband does not beat his wife even when they are poor.”

Then Jahanara, another Tangail woman overhearing our conversation, told the story of her women’s group which went as a group to the house of a member who was being abused and asked her husband to stop beating her. This reminded another Tangail woman walking ahead of us of another group’s effort to get a member’s husband to allow their daughter to continue in school even though he was ready to arrange her marriage. They staged a sit-in at the member’s home.

Although separately they had used their groups as bases of collective action, before their walk together in Kustia, the Tangail women’s groups were unaware of each other’s collective actions. Together, they recognized that their collective action caused the husbands’ public embarrassment and brought public attention to their views on domestic violence and girls’ education. By the time we arrived at the meeting place, the women were energized by their stories. Through their dialogue, the Kustia and Tangail women recognized that the examples of group action were not isolated. They identified collective action as a tried and effective method of breaking out of coerced silence in order to voice social criticism and to influence social decision making. And they learned they possessed the means of an effective form of activism.

The main purpose of the trip was for Save the Children to train its Tangail women’s groups in leadership and group management skills so that they could sustain themselves when Save the Children ceased working in Tangail. Save the Children was in the process of focusing their efforts in the more economically challenged region of Nasrinagar, to the northeast. The conventional approach to such a training would have been to bring leadership trainers from elsewhere in Bangladesh to Tangail. However, the principal program officer proposed the training be conducted by Soptagram leadership trainers in Kustia for a number of reasons. The journey to Kustia would provide the Tangail women with a life experience that would make them unique in their villages. Women and most poor men do not travel beyond their villages except (for women) to marry. The experience of *bidesh* (“foreign”) travel would strengthen their position in the community, benefiting the women and their groups. The women were required to get their husbands’ permission for the trip. Having one’s wife go was a source of status for most

practiced dowry and Muslims, particularly poor Muslims, practiced it in less than 20% of marriages (Timm & Gain 1992: 74; White 1992: 104–106).

men, so they granted their support for their wives' trips and correspondingly, for their wives' ongoing participation in the groups.

The purpose of bringing the Tangail women to Kustia (an all-day journey) for a week was to allow women from different backgrounds who had been participating in women's groups sponsored by Save the Children in Tangail and Soptagram in Kustia to learn from each others' experiences. The program officer expected that, together, uninhibited by family pressures, the women would speak freely about their lives and honestly about the potential for their families to inhibit the success of the groups. By locating the training in Kustia, Save the Children would remove the women from their families and community temporarily and thereby free them from some social constraints that might otherwise inhibit their interactions. In addition Save the Children identified Soptagram as the ideal partner for this training as they had their own women's groups and shared the goal of women's empowerment. Both Soptagram and Save the Children thought their groups would be strengthened by meeting each other. They did not know what the Tangail and Kustia women would learn from each other, but Save the Children hoped that the Tangail women would learn that they could be self-reliant and that they did not need Save the Children to keep their groups sustained.

The groups' activism before coming to Kustia and their sharing their experiences in Kustia are examples of social criticism in a context of coercive gender hierarchy. The deliberation in Kustia between Tangail and Kustia women was a form of deliberation that resulted in the shared learning among the women in an environment secure from potentially harmful gender inequality. The activism of the Tangail women of staging sit-ins to influence their husbands is an example of critics trying to make an otherwise insecure environment one in which their voices are heard. Before a background of gender inequality, these women demonstrate deliberation as important social criticism. Ignoring the Bengali proverb, these women have found a means to argue with the crocodiles.<sup>3</sup>

### **The anecdote and social criticism**

Although this anecdote does not give us a complete account of Third World feminist social criticism, it provides an illustration and a starting point for my subsequent discussion. While it seems like a story about

<sup>3</sup> Sarah C. White provides the source of the proverb in *Arguing with the Crocodile* (1992). For more general discussions of women's activism in the context of gender hierarchy in Bangladesh see White (1992) for a local and anthropological description and Roushan Jahan (1995) for a more general and political description.

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particular women, the story actually reveals the critical components of my philosophy of social criticism. This anecdote raises three sets of questions about social critics and social criticism in everyday life: how do social critics do social criticism? what do social critics do? and who is a social critic? A philosophy of social criticism needs to give a general account of the method, roles, and qualifications of social critics.

Through this anecdote, I offer a glimpse of the method of social criticism practiced by women activists. Having discussed the problems of domestic violence among themselves, the women on the walk identify collective action as a potential means of making their social criticism heard. Being heard is no guarantee that their social criticism, once made, will successfully influence social change. These women live under familial, social, political, and economic values, practices, and norms that enforce women's silence.<sup>4</sup> However, they have identified a way to break that silence with each other and to force their husbands to hear them. As critics, these women challenge the common practice of wife battery and they assert a daughter's right to an education. Their method is to inform themselves through collective dialogue, to challenge generally accepted values, practices, and norms, and to advocate for those things they believe women should have, in this case safety in their homes and an education.

The critics in my anecdote also demonstrate the multiple roles of social critics. Critics promote inquiry. The foreign researcher asked questions: "What's going on?" and "Why do men hit their wives?" Critics promote deliberation. By asking questions I facilitated inquiry among the women. Individual women shared their understandings of the causes of domestic violence. The women described using collective action to enable their participation in deliberation about the values, practices, and norms that affect their lives. Critics promote institutional change. By bringing the women together in the first place, Save the Children under the initiative of its program officer acted as a social critic by offering a unique institutional environment for the women. I call this an institutional change because it changed (temporarily) the conventional context of women's interaction with each other and created a

<sup>4</sup> By "values, practices, and norms" I mean to include the familial, social, economic and political institutions of a society including formal laws and legal organizations (like legislatures or courts), informal practices like dating, and hybrid practices such as marriage which are guided by both formal laws, organized religion, and informal norms. I mention familial values, practices, and norms separately from social ones because I want to be able to distinguish between family activities and those social activities that are not directly related to the family. Although I refer to them as *a society's* values, practices and norms, I do not mean to imply that they are recognized or practiced universally within that society.

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unique opportunity for interaction since poor rural women rarely exchange experiences with strangers. The process might promote further inquiry, deliberation, and institutional changes when the women go home to their communities. All three roles of critics can overlap and all three can be directed at visible practices such as domestic violence or at more foundational social values and norms such as gendered power inequalities. By promoting inquiry, deliberation, and institutional change in an otherwise coercive and oppressive environment, critics may promote social change that is more informed, collective, and uncoerced. By informed, I mean that all views are heard and given the respect of critical attention. By collective, I mean that perspectives are shared so that together society has more information (though some information can be misleading). And by uncoerced I mean that views are expressed freely and speakers are uninhibited by norms of behavior or by specific threats from others.

Finally, the anecdote demonstrates that the qualifications of social critics are not exclusive. The critics in the story are real people, doing their jobs and living their lives. They are a foreign researcher who asked a question, a woman who experiences domestic violence in her home, another who is familiar with it in her neighborhood, two groups of women who acted in concert to voice their criticism of wife abuse and their desire to educate their daughters, the Save the Children program officer, and the two development organizations. They are individuals and collectivities; they are foreigners, locals, and people who cannot neatly be categorized as either; they have thought about these issues alone, but they work in concert for social change. Who among these are *social critics*? All are.

Everyday people walking in an everyday place, undocumented by reporters is not what people commonly think of when they picture social critics or activists. But, I argue that these women are active in their social criticism and by example offer a model of social criticism appropriate for those otherwise silenced by the values, practices, and norms of their daily lives. This is not to say that, when using the method I outline to do the roles I describe, the critics I identify will be able to effect social change. Social criticism is one way to counter, mitigate, or undermine power inequalities, but whether a particular critical effort will be effective is a matter of politics.

### **Social criticism and political theory**

Contemporary deliberative liberal democratic theory provides the context for the theory of social criticism I propose. Deliberative theorists

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have outlined principles for framing discussion, designed institutions for promoting free and equal discussion, and even brought to life a model deliberative forum. Explicit and implicit in their work is criticism of a society in which political power is unevenly disbursed and an argument that more inclusive public deliberation will enhance the legitimacy of political decision making even while those decisions remain largely in the hands of representatives.

Despite its critical implications, deliberative theorists have yet to show how to use deliberation in everyday life to bring into practice the assumptions, principles, institutions, and models that are the substance of their theories. An account of social criticism is an essential complement to deliberative theory if the latter is to be a credible attack on power inequalities.

Were deliberative theorists to give greater attention to the sources of inequality and misinterpretation in the real world, they might also recognize that an account of social criticism is a valuable component of a political philosophy. Educative deliberation – that is, deliberation for the purposes of contributing to a society's collective learning process, discovery, and knowledge – is the basis of the complementary philosophy of social criticism I propose. Given the importance of educative deliberation to social decision making, the critic's role is to promote it; critics from a variety of perspectives contribute to it; good critics make use of it in their methodology.

In the exposition of their political theories democratic theorists provide an account of how citizens generally participate in democratic society and decision making as they describe it. They give accounts of the education required to participate thus, and they give examples of the institutions that will enable citizens to participate as described. And yet, when it comes to social criticism – to giving an account of how those same citizens can participate in bringing about the polity they describe – these theorists are silent. At most they give an account of the role of the political theorist as social critic. But political theorists are not the most important political actors in bringing about social change; certainly, we ought not to base our hopes for seeing greater democracy realized on the theorists' ability to make a sound argument. Really, social change toward greater or worse democracy is brought about by those same citizens who will participate in the improved polity once achieved. And so, it makes sense that a democratic political theory should have something to say about how social criticism might influence social decision making such that social change toward a more democratic society (however envisioned) is possible. The theorist or philosopher of social criticism cannot predict how effective a given practice of social criticism

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will be – that is a matter of actual politics – but an account of citizens' roles in bringing about political change is a missing constitutive element of contemporary democratic theory.

Some liberal democratic theorists have made speaking, listening, exchanging arguments, and thinking critically essential to their views of public decision making.<sup>5</sup> These deliberative theorists might be expected to give a similar account of social criticism as being a function of a critic's speaking with and listening to others, thinking critically about their and her own ideas and exchanging arguments with others. Moreover, one might expect them to argue that the critic's job is to promote such activity in the political forum. As such, one might expect that they consider how a critic goes about promoting such deliberation under the circumstance of real world inequality, exclusivity of political fora, advantage of elite political actors, and coercion of nonelite actors. However, the more common approach among political theorists is to offer social criticism as an explicit or implied extension of their political philosophy. Whether their own social criticism is explicit or implied, the deliberative theorists do not offer a general account of what social criticism should be.

John Dewey, a forefather of deliberative democratic theory, has been explicit in incorporating a philosophy of social criticism into his political theory. His philosophy of human learning is foundational to his political theory and theory of social criticism. Dewey argues that people and society learn by listening to one another's ideas and then playing out in their imagination all of the possible scenarios to which following one suggestion would lead.

[D]eliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action ... Thought runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure or disaster. (1983 [1922]: 132–133)

Individuals and societies make decisions similarly. Both have an interest in making the best decisions as measured by their ability to reconcile competing understandings (1983 [1922]: 134 and 1989 [1944]: 273). According to Dewey's political philosophy, for individuals to participate equally and freely in democracy, they must have the intellectual capacity

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary deliberative political theorists are numerous and varied in their theorizing, as I will discuss in chapter 2. Theorists who have written foundational arguments in deliberative democratic theory include Joseph M. Bessette (1980), James Bohman (1996) Joshua Cohen (1989a), John S. Dryzek (1990), Jon Elster (1997), David Estlund (1993), James S. Fishkin (1991), Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996), Jack Knight and James Johnson (1994), Bernard Manin (1987), Jane Mansbridge (1992, 1988), Frank I. Michelman (1986), David Miller (1992), Thomas A. Spragens, Jr. (1990), Cass R. Sunstein (1988) and Mark Warren (1996a).



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to do so. They must be able to think free, undictated thoughts, to discover and learn with others (1983 [1922]: 9–11, 134 and 1989 [1946b]: 221). In addition, deliberation requires the ability to imagine – to imagine the responses that one’s actions will elicit from others and to imagine the possible consequences of one’s actions (1983 [1922]: 134, 144, 217). And people must value the collective life that facilitates the equal and free participation of all (1989 [1942]: 174, 178–9). Then, in Dewey’s view, deliberation is at once the means of developing in people the ability to participate equally, freely and valuably in their collective life, and it is the end of collective life. Dewey’s political philosophy emphasizes the developmental role of deliberation in individuals’ abilities to contribute to collective life and in the society’s ability to function according to the collected understandings of its citizens. The role of the social critic, according to Dewey’s political philosophy, is to educate future citizens to be critical thinkers. Of equal import, the critic must inspire current citizens to reflect thoughtfully on the existing or emerging values, practices, and norms of their society such as increasing inequality in industrializing society (1980 [1916b] and 1982 [1919]) and totalitarianism (1989 [1942]) because they may otherwise undermine the freedom and equality of liberal democracy (1980 [1916a] and 1980 [1916b]). No deliberative theorist since Dewey has appreciated the role of deliberation in bringing about the conditions for deliberative democracy.

The implied social criticism of deliberative theorists tends to focus on a society’s institutional and social preconditions, and procedures of deliberative democracy. For example, Amy Gutmann and Joshua Cohen articulate a political philosophy of deliberative democracy according to which, despite moral disagreements, citizens debate political issues and reach political consensus.<sup>6</sup> Such a view requires that citizens tolerate opposing views, listen to each other respectfully, and make their decisions based on their thoughtful evaluation of the arguments presented. According to the deliberative theorists, deliberative democracy requires and reinforces an ideal environment for deliberated social decision making that includes self-respect, mutual respect, equality, and an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes reasonable argument in the public sphere. According to their view, where societies sufficiently approximate the ideal environment, deliberative democracy will perpetuate that environment and yield legitimate political consensus (e.g., Cohen 1989a). The implied social criticism is that societies should work to promote the ideal deliberative environment and its corresponding

<sup>6</sup> See Gutmann (1995), Gutmann & Thompson (1996), and Cohen (1989a).



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necessary institutions. Cohen and co-author Joel Rogers argue that associations are such necessary institutions for deliberative democracy and they offer an idealized account of those associations, but do not offer a complementary account of how to bring about such institutions (Cohen & Rogers 1992). Gutmann implies through her discussion of *Mozert v. Hawkins* and *Wisconsin v. Yoder* that social criticism should promote an educational system that teaches critical thinking such that people learn to hold their views not dogmatically, but based on their having respectfully considered alternative views and having chosen their own views as being most promising (Gutmann 1995; see also Gutmann & Thompson 1996). The social criticism she offers is implied rather than explicit. She offers examples of what constitute (in her view) convincing arguments about what education should entail, but there is no complementary account of how society might bring about such an educational system.

Both Cohen and Gutmann (and their co-authors) offer an account of deliberative democracy that is based on the strong assumptions of self-respect, mutual respect, equality, and an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes reasonable argument preexisting in the society in question. But such preconditions are lacking in most societies (and one might be suspicious of how widespread they are in a society that someone claims nearly approximates those preconditions).<sup>7</sup> In the real world, inequalities are too pressing, or too invisible, for the implied social criticism of ideal political theory to be relevant. Deliberation is essential to their political vision, but they have not employed it for social criticism where the preconditions of deliberative democracy are lacking. Moreover, they require that a society agree on the form of argument that will be acceptable in deliberative fora and they describe that form as narrowly consistent with legal norms of argumentation. Following this paradigm, social criticism would be very similar to what a judge does and very dissimilar to the actions and offstage voices of silent critics.

Benjamin Barber comes closer to Dewey in incorporating a theory of social criticism into his political theory. In *Strong Democracy*, Barber includes in his argument for participatory democracy an argument about what social criticism needs to be in order to bring about such participatory democracy. For Barber, strong democracy is an ongoing form of political life where people participate in public decision making as free citizens and who, through self-legislation, together resolve conflict despite lack of common ground (1984: 117–138, 151). Social

<sup>7</sup> Jack Knight and James Johnson argue that deliberative democracy requires “equal opportunity of access to political influence,” but argue that there is no way to measure the capacity to exercise political influence (1997: 280, 303–304, 305).

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criticism complements and promotes strong democracy according to Barber. Social criticism is an ongoing incremental process leading toward strong democracy by taking advantage of existing practices and institutions that are supportive of strong democracy (1984: 262). Of the specific institutions he proposes, some, such as television-facilitated national “town meetings” and the national referendum process have been tried in some form (1984: 274–278).<sup>8</sup> Barber offers explicit social criticisms that are consistent with his political philosophy and are intended to bring it about. But note, these are specific criticisms offered by him. He does not tell us how he arrived at these suggestions and not others.

In my view, strong democracy implies a philosophy of social criticism according to which many social critics from a variety of critical perspectives exchange their ideas of what constitutes appropriate social criticism. Barber has articulated that social criticism should be incremental and ongoing, but then he offers a list of suggestions that, to be consistent with strong democracy, should be offered as the result of a deliberative exchange among a variety of social critics. One might argue that the research leading up to his publishing this list included deliberative exchanges with other social scientists, but he does not tell us why he recommends these, and not other, suggestions.

I am not criticizing Barber for not doing what he did not promise to do. Rather, I use him as an example of a deliberative theorist who offers a partial sketch of what social criticism generally should be in order to be consistent with his account of strong democracy. But social criticism needs to be more than incremental, practicable, and leading toward strong democracy; it also needs to specify the roles, qualifications, and method of social critics. Recognizing that we live in an imperfect world, deliberative theorists owe society a general account of the process of social criticism so that, as a society, we can bring about deliberative democracy *in a deliberative way*. In addition, as I will show in chapter 2, deliberative democratic theory as social criticism resolves a debate among deliberative theorists about whether deliberation sets or meets an epistemological standard.

All of the deliberative theorists discussed above articulate a political philosophy and either explicitly or implicitly suggest certain corresponding social criticisms. However, real world values in conflict, competing interests, and disputed priorities generate philosophical dilemmas. A question in political philosophy is interesting only if it seems relevant to contemporary political life. Ian Shapiro takes the opposite tack from those discussed above. In *Political Criticism*, Shapiro criticizes

<sup>8</sup> Barber proposes modifications to the current state referendum process and implementing it on the national level. I discuss the proposal in chapter 4.