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Critical Analysis Paper – Ethical Evaluation

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Introduction

On April 1, 2015, the city of Seattle implemented its new minimum wage law that by 2021 will raise the city's minimum wage to \$15 per hour. Large employers, those with more than 500 employees nationwide, are currently required to pay their Seattle-based workers \$15 per hour. Small employers, those with fewer than 500 employees, have until 2021 to fully phase in the wage increase. Seattle was the first major city to increase its minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

The "fight for \$15," as a union-aligned interest group colloquially branded the effort to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour both nationwide in Seattle, has been a fierce battle among interest groups, economists, and policymakers (Greenhouse, 2015). No one in Seattle truly knew what the effects of such a dramatic increase in the minimum wage (up from \$9.47 per hour) would be. No city or state had ever implemented such a high minimum wage. Economists and policy experts posited that the increase would help or hurt the local economy based on their own beliefs of the role the minimum wage plays in the marketplace.

At the time, the business community generally believed that the increase to \$15 per hour was too high, too drastic, and would result in higher costs and job cuts because owners would not be able to afford to pay their employees more (Tuccille, 2018). Labor unions and liberal interest groups believed that workers needed to earn a living wage, that the additional income paid to them would stimulate the local economy, and increased costs for consumers associated with increased wages would be negligible (Constant, 2018).

Whatever their motivations, interest groups across the ideological spectrum weighed in on the policy implications of Seattle's proposed \$15 per hour minimum wage.

The debate among the city council members did not match the diversity of thought and opinion presented by various interest groups.

Dialogic Ethics

A communicator who is working from a position of dialogic ethics asks, “how can I meet this situation, not with demand, but with an intense desire to learn?” Such a position does not suggest agreement, just recognition of what is before us as the door to learning (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008). Members of the Seattle City Council are politicians, not communicators, so they are not required to engage in dialogic ethics. In fact, many of them choose not to. They approach policy discussions in a non-dialogic manner with demand rather than an intense desire to learn. At city council meetings, dissenting views are consistently shouted down by those in the audience and generally disregarded by the Members themselves (Norimine, 2017).

Dialogic ethics is not about “getting my own way,” but about meeting what is before us – like it or not (Arnett et al., 2008). The minimum wage debate in Seattle began in a dialogically unethical manner with an intense attentiveness to the historical moment of achieving a \$15 per hour rather than collaborating with stakeholders to determine the right policy for the city. Would \$11 per hour be a better option? \$12.50? No change at all? No options were realistically discussed because Socialist City Councilmember Kshama Sawant demanded to “Fight for \$15 (McGreal, 2014).” She had no interest in listening to others and did not engage in dialogue with anyone outside of those who already agreed with her. Sawant’s non-dialogic and uncivil manner made any other minimum wage-related policy options unattainable because she threatened to file an initiative that would have led to a public vote on the minimum wage if the decision made by the City Council was not to

her liking (McGreal, 2014). This blackmail may have been uncivil and was definitely not dialogically ethical, but it worked. In mid-2014, after perfunctory collaboration with the business community, Seattle enacted what was then the highest minimum wage in the nation.

Impact of Dialogic Communication

Dialogic civility seeks to halt the triad of domination that seeks to defame, discount, and dissect the Other (Arnett, et al., 2008). In Seattle City Council, the Other is considered anyone or any organization that does not accept worker-focused liberal politics. The real debate over the minimum wage increase was only how long businesses would have to comply with the \$15 per hour wage, not whether it was a good idea or whether a better way forward existed (McGreal, 2014). This is not dialogic civility and points to the City Council being a part of the triad of domination over those who disagree with its policies. Dialogic civility has to do with learning and being open-minded to the opinions and thoughts of others and beginning dialogue by listening, very little of which takes place in the Seattle City Council. Opposing viewpoints are discounted and organizations or individuals that do not agree with the majority viewpoint are dissected and defamed (Norimine, 2017).

Dialogic ethics listens to what is before one, attends to the historical moment, and seeks to negotiate new possibilities (Arnett et al., 2008). This is what happened in Seattle during the debate over the minimum wage, but the listening and negotiating was only among allies, not the Other. No one sought to understand or listen to the Other. The City Council saw \$15 per hour as a historical moment, but not because it was determined in a

non-partisan manner to be the best policy option. Rather, the historical moment was part of a national special interest-led movement.

Creating Dialogic and Ethical Deliberation

In 2014, then-Mayor Ed Murray formed a committee to explore the minimum wage issue. A majority of stakeholders wanted to increase the minimum wage, so the committee set about coming up with recommendations for the best way to do so. Unions, restaurants, businesses, and non-profits were represented on the committee, but it was the Mayor's goal from the beginning to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour (Murray, 2014).

The deliberation among the committee members was both dialogic and non-dialogic. The plan all along was to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, so there was little intent to listen to or understand the Other. However, the committee members did deliberate, to some extent, in a dialogic manner, and agreed to include phase-in requirements of seven years for small businesses and three years for large businesses in an effort to address the concerns of the business community. The business leaders on the committee agreed to the \$15 per hour minimum wage because they were concerned that, had an agreement not been reached, liberal interest groups led by Councilmember Sawant would have filed an initiative that would have been much less accommodating to the business community.

Interest groups across the political spectrum have a defined point of view and are not interested in engaging with the Other. Seattle is led by liberal-leaning elected officials, so it is not surprising that the Other is not engaged. The Other does not need to be engaged in Seattle. However, this does not lead to dialogically ethical behavior. Anyone familiar with the "Seattle Process," defined by endless meetings and discussions without people learning

from the ground of the Other, has certainly heard the phrase “we need more dialogue.” Dialogic ethics rejects the need for “more dialogue” because it “ensures the impossibility of dialogic ethics, which hides from the ongoing demand made by oneself or another (Arnett et al., 2008).” Thus, the 2014 minimum wage debate in Seattle was not conducted in a dialogically ethical manner.

Conclusion

Raising the minimum wage in any city is a decision that must include dialogically ethical, collaborative decision-making. Dialogic ethics embraces learning and considers the impulse to tell without understanding the Other a counteraction to the kind of ethical engagement needed in a world of acknowledged difference (Arnett et al., 2008). The legitimate concerns of all parties should be considered in a thoughtful manner and a decision should be made after considering all the factors without any biases or preconceived notions.

Unfortunately, the debate over whether to raise the minimum wage in Seattle was not undertaken in a dialogically ethical manner. By pre-determining the appropriate minimum wage to be \$15 per hour and then only debating the accommodations necessary to implement such a drastic increase, stakeholders did not learn from the Other, nor was the Other allowed to tell the stakeholders information in a monologue. Learning was not embraced by any of the interest groups or policymakers; rather, minds were already made up and decisions were made long before the debate unfolded. This dialogically unethical behavior may have resulted in a higher minimum wage, but it did not include sound policymaking decisions and learning from the ground of the Other.

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