

Learning to Articulate: From Ethical Motivation to Political Demands

Claudia W. Ruitenberg
University of British Columbia

People throw up their hands, then sit on them.

— Margaret Atwood, *Moral Disorder*

INTRODUCTION

In many postindustrial societies, concern has risen over a growing alienation and disengagement from political processes and institutions, especially among youth. This lack of political engagement and participation raises the question whether and how young people can be educated in a way that engages them politically and that increases the chances that they will remain politically engaged. Several scholars who have previously addressed this question (for example, Eamonn Callan and Klas Roth)¹ have done so from the perspective of deliberative democracy, that is to say, from a conception of democracy that emphasizes deliberation between

free and equal citizens (and their representatives) [who] justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future.²

By contrast, I share the perspective of scholars such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Jacques Rancière, who have argued that political disengagement can be explained not by people's inability to participate in deliberative processes, but by the denial of the constitutive nature of disagreement inherent in the deliberative framework itself: "Consensus does not mean simply the erasure of conflicts for the benefit of common interests. Consensus means erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life."³ In this essay, therefore, my analysis of political disengagement and its remedies will be informed by the agonistic approaches to democracy advocated by Mouffe, Laclau, and Rancière.

A MOTIVATIONAL DEFICIT?

Simon Critchley describes the alienation of the public from traditional political processes and institutions as a "motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life."⁴ What this means, explains Critchley, is that the discourses, practices, and institutions of secular liberal pluralist democracy are "simply not part of our mindset, the dispositions of our subjectivity" (*ID*, 7). Where ethnicity and religion do seem capable of galvanizing people, secular liberal pluralist democracy is not, at present, able to motivate significant numbers of political subjects.

Critchley perceives the motivational deficit to lie in the absence of *ethical* grounds in contemporary secular liberal democracy. The people who turn away from said democracy are, in Critchley's terms, either passive nihilists, who turn inward to meditation and New Age "existential balm" (*ID*, 3), or active nihilists, who seek to "destroy this world and bring another into being" (*ID*, 5). Both types of nihilists seek their motivation in one way or another in the metaphysical, and Critchley

proposes that a powerful conception of ethics is required to re-engage these nihilists with politics: “What is lacking at the present time of massive political disappointment is a motivating, empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present, an ethics that is able to respond to and resist the political situation in which we find ourselves” (*ID*, 8).

However, I believe that Critchley does not make a strong enough case for his premise that the motivational deficit in politics is an ethical deficit or, to put it differently, that the lack of political engagement and action is rooted in a lack of ethical motivation. In this essay I examine Critchley’s diagnosis more closely, and argue that, in addition to an ethical deficit, an *articulatory deficit* plagues the contemporary political situation. Therefore, citizens should learn not only to perceive ethical injustice, as suggested by Critchley, but also to form and articulate political demands, in the sense elaborated by Laclau.

Arguably, for a political project to take shape, three conditions need to be met, though not necessarily sequentially. The first is a perception of an ethical demand, leading to the understanding “I should act.” This perception necessarily includes affective aspects, something Critchley describes as the circular experience of the approval of a perceived demand and the perception of a demand that demands approval (*ID*, 16). The second condition is a sense of agency (“I can act”), which is required for the subject to reach the resolve “I will act.” The third condition is an articulation of an individual resolve to act with others’ resolve to act, leading to some form of a collective “we will act.” Of course this breakdown is artificial: the perceived possibility of articulation, for example, is likely to affect a person’s sense of agency. Nonetheless, the analysis serves to highlight that if one of the conditions is not met, there cannot be a *political* project in the sense of politics as concerned not with interactions between individual persons but with the relations of power that structure those interactions. For example, if I perceive that I “should” act to alleviate an injustice but do not believe that I have the ability to do so, I am not likely to act. And if I reach a personal ethical resolve and even act upon this resolve but this does not, somehow, become articulated with the resolve and action of others, my personal ethical project will not become a larger political project.

The question regarding the “motivational deficit” is thus whether it is truly a “motivational deficit” or whether it is also, or rather, an “agentic deficit” or “articulatory deficit.” Is the main problem that people do not perceive any injustices, or that they perceive injustices but do not know how to address them or believe that they do not have any power to address them? Or is the main problem that people respond to injustices in ways that remain unarticulated, or that lie outside democratic and political discourses, practices, and institutions, as they have been traditionally understood?

I am not arguing that there is no lack of ethical motivation at all but rather that, even if there is an ethical deficit, this is not the only and perhaps not even the main condition that is lacking for political engagement and action. There are signs that people do perceive ethical injustice and are even motivated to act upon it (for

example, as “ethical consumers”), but that the ways in which they do so often remain unarticulated. It has also been argued that current interpretations of “citizenship education” have depoliticized citizenship by emphasizing individual moral virtues and actions at the expense of an understanding of the political dimensions of citizenship. Ken Osborne, for example, observes that “schools...have equated the good citizen with the good person, the man or woman who helps others, respects other people’s rights, obeys the law, is suitably patriotic, and the like.”⁵ I argue that a focus on articulation is needed to keep efforts at revitalizing political engagement focused on the political, that is, the ineradicable possibility of contestation of any given social order and its distribution of inclusions and exclusions.

Although he emphasizes the lack of ethical motivation, Critchley is not oblivious to the need to articulate these motivations politically. For example, he writes that “the art of politics consists in weaving...cells of resistance together into a common front, a shared political subjectivity” (*ID*, 114). However, Critchley does not address *how* this common front can be achieved and he wavers between a commitment to deliberate, articulatory practices and a commitment to dispersed, anarchic multiplicity. One moment, he writes that what is needed is “the invention of names for that around which politics can hegemonize itself and then aggregating those names into some sort of association, common front or collective will” (*ID*, 104), the next that “politics is the manifestation of the multiplicity that is the people” (*ID*, 129). I argue that articulation does not “just happen” but takes concerted effort, and that opportunities to learn about and to experience the logic and mechanics of articulation are important political complements to the moral education Critchley advocates.

ARTICULATION AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

If ethics is, as Critchley proposes, what gives politics its propulsion or force (*ID*, 13), articulation is what channels that force and gives it direction. Politics can thus be conceived as a vector that needs both direction and force. I agree with Critchley that anger is a basic political emotion (*ID*, 130)⁶, but this anger needs a target and a strategy, which is what the process of articulation gives it. Political articulation without ethics is, as Critchley rightly points out, morally blind: it can help people organize politically for an immoral cause. Ethical motivation without articulation, however, risks remaining politically powerless and ineffective. So how does political articulation happen, and how does an understanding of this process help us address questions of political disengagement?

Critchley notes that one of the big difficulties for political engagement is the lack of a political name with which people can associate: “Politics is always about nomination. It is about naming a political subjectivity and organizing politically around that name” (*ID*, 103). This is precisely the focus of Laclau’s detailed analysis of the process of articulation.⁷ The development of political subjectivity is, for Laclau, the construction of a “people” (in the sense of *demos*, not *ethnos*), a process that begins with democratic demands:

We will call a demand which, satisfied or not, remains isolated a *democratic demand*. A plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader

social subjectivity we will call *popular demands* — they start, at a very incipient level, to constitute a “people” as a potential historical actor. (*OPR*, 74)

In other words, it is not until the dissatisfaction and demand of an individual or small group becomes articulated with the dissatisfaction and demand of another individual or small group that a “popular” demand is formed and the people of this popular demand are inaugurated as “people” or political subjects. The question is what precisely Laclau means by “equivalential articulation” and what conditions need to be met for it to work successfully. Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”⁸ Thus, articulation has to be understood as a joining, linking, or hinging of social demands without erasing their differences and subsuming them under one identity. What joins or articulates the different social demands, Laclau and Mouffe explain further, is a *shared antagonism*. The “presence of antagonistic forces” is one of the conditions for the articulation of social demands into an equivalential chain.⁹

A recent example of the force of shared antagonism in producing an equivalential articulation between disparate social demands can be found in the protests against the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, B.C. Security analysts for the Vancouver Olympics have expressed concern about the ways in which “the usually fragmented, single-issue groups are converging and organizing in ways never seen before in Canada.”¹⁰ The protesters themselves seem aware of the articulatory promise of the 2010 Olympics as an antagonistic force. David Cunningham, spokesman for the Vancouver Anti-Poverty Committee, recognized that “the Olympics is a perfect unifier for Canada’s disparate activist community,” leading to the articulation of demands, for example, for social housing as well as the recognition of Aboriginal rights.¹¹

There is antagonism, explains Laclau, as soon as we speak of “social demands” because “a demand is always addressed to somebody. So from the very beginning we are confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other” (*OPR*, 86). In order for the social demands to amplify each other and form a strong chorus of demands, it is important that they come together under a common and strategic signifier: a political name or image that articulates the various demands and addresses them to a common “unresponsive power.” Laclau analyzes the mechanics of the discursive production of political subjectivity in great detail, because, on his view,

equivalential relations would not go beyond a vague feeling of solidarity if they did not crystallize in a certain discursive identity which no longer represents democratic demands as equivalent, but the equivalential link as such. It is only that moment of crystallization that constitutes the “people.” (*OPR*, 3)

Thus, the way in which the hinge or joint between different social demands is named or visualized is crucial in the constitution of the people as “people.” This signifier, furthermore, works not representationally but rather performatively: the name or image does not describe or depict a pre-existing “people” but rather calls this “people” into being.

Laclau uses the psychoanalytic term “cathexis” to signify the process of investment in one signifier and stresses that “we are dealing not with a conceptual operation of *finding* an abstract common feature underlying all social grievances, but with a performative operation constituting the chain as such” (OPR, 97). Cathexis in the process of political articulation is the *emotional* investment in a signifier: “if an entity becomes the object of an investment — as in being in love, or in hatred — the investment belongs necessarily to the order of affect” (OPR, 110). The constitution of an equivalential chain of social demands requires an emotional investment in a political name or image, but this emotional investment stems from the shared antagonism, not from a sense that the signifier represents any essential identity. The signifier in which groups become invested functions “catachrestically,” which means that the signifier that becomes the signifier of the equivalential link necessarily represents that link inadequately or improperly because it cannot be read representationally in any literal way. Explains Laclau,

In classical rhetoric, a figural term which cannot be substituted by a literal one was called a catachresis (for instance, when we talk about ‘the leg of a chair’). This argument can be generalized if we face the fact that any distortion of meaning has, at its root, the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit. (OPR, 71)

Thus, Laclau argues, the name or discursive identity that comes to represent the equivalential link between particular demands “can only be an individual demand which, for a set of circumstantial reasons, acquires a certain centrality” (OPR, 95). In other words, no external or more general term can be introduced to articulate the particular demands; instead, one of the particular demands splits itself discursively, so that it can come to signify both the particular demand and the equivalential link articulating it to other particular demands: “while it remains a particular demand, it also becomes the signifier of a wider universality” (OPR, 95).

Laclau gives the example of the Polish trade union *Solidarnosc*, whose name and logo in the 1980s came to function not merely as name and logo for the trade union but also as the equivalential link between various social demands aimed at the communist regime, such as the demand for independent trade unions and the demand for press freedom: “The *Solidarnosc* symbols...did not remain the particular demands of a group of workers in Gdansk, but came to signify a much wider popular camp against an oppressive regime” (OPR, 81).

However, Laclau fails to mention that the name and union *Solidarnosc* did not exist until September 1980, after the strikes in the shipyards had been organized by the Free Trade Unions of the Coast, and that the famous logo, which looks like it was taken off a protest banner, was designed by Jurek Janiszewski, who was not only an activist against the communist regime but also a professional graphic designer.¹² This changes somewhat the impression Laclau gives of the catachrestic process by which an existing signifier is discursively split and invested with a more general meaning: “*Solidarnosc*” was, both as grapheme and image, a new signifier, and it had not been in existence very long before it came to stand for a wider revolutionary movement.¹³

In fact, it appears that other effective political movements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have also had some professional help with the selection of political signifiers and the mechanics of catechesis. For example, Roger Cohen analyzes how the Serbian grassroots movement *Otpor* (Resistance), one of the key groups in the revolution that ousted Slobodan Milosevic in October 1999, received American instruction on political resistance.¹⁴ Similarly, Ian Traynor argues that the “Orange Revolution” in the Ukraine (2004–05) was shaped by “a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in western branding and mass marketing.”¹⁵ Such analyses of the professional orchestration and “branding” of political change certainly give rise to critique. David Lane, for example, doubts that these “revolutions” were truly democratic revolutions “from below” and proposes that they are better understood as *coups d’état* in which counterelites made handy use of their understanding of the mechanics of political articulation in order to come to power.¹⁶ However, what I wish to highlight with this discussion is how the political changes in Eastern Europe illustrate the need for *both* ethical motivation and an understanding of the mechanics of articulation. As I argued earlier, political articulation needs the force of ethical motivation just as ethical motivation needs the direction and focus of political articulation. The events in Poland, Serbia, and the Ukraine underscore that the propulsion of an ethical perception of injustice did not result in an effective political movement until it was directed by a practical understanding of political articulation. Moreover, the way in which the signifier “Solidarnosc” emerged illustrates that, *pace* Laclau, it may be possible for quite new signifiers to be entered into the articulatory process.

POLITICAL EDUCATION

I have argued that Critchley’s ethical remedy for the motivational deficit in contemporary secular liberal pluralist democracy should be augmented with a political remedy for the articulatory deficit. It follows from this argument that, in order to overcome both deficits, people need to learn to become ethically motivated as well as how to translate that ethical motivation into political action. Put differently, and in terms of Critchley’s emphasis on anger as a political emotion: political reengagement requires not just that people can get sufficiently angry about injustices, but also that they have a sense of how to channel that anger politically. This political aspect is controversial in the context of schools. I would expect parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers alike to object that instruction in the mechanics of political articulation would constitute a form of activist training that does not belong in a school, and I agree that the kind of hands-on training described by Traynor and Cohen belongs in social movements rather than in schools. But let us look at political education a little more broadly.

If a person has no idea how to translate her or his ideas about a desirable social order into actions that aim to bring this social order about, then I would argue that we cannot call this person “politically educated.” Indeed, having some knowledge of how to translate one’s perceptions of injustice into actions that aim to lessen this injustice is part of what others have called “political efficacy”: the belief that one’s

actions can make a political difference.¹⁷ Political efficacy combines the sense of agency and the ability to articulate one's individual actions with those of others that I proposed earlier in this essay as two conditions for political action, and it is an important part of citizenship education that takes the political aspects of citizenship seriously.

Laclau's agonistic conception of politics, which I have employed in this essay, is in tension with the socialization function of schools, according to which youth should be taught to participate effectively in existing structures rather than to contest them. But socialization is not the only nor, arguably, the main function of schools. Gert Biesta has argued for *subjectification* as one of the core functions of contemporary education, in addition to qualification and socialization. Biesta interprets subjectification from the angle of the singularity of the subject, "ways of being in which the individual is not simply a specimen of a more encompassing order," and he draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to elaborate the concept.¹⁸ I will purloin the term "subjectification" and argue that education in democratic societies not only has the explicit purposes of socialization and qualification but also ought to leave room for subjectification in the political sense that Rancière gives it.

For Rancière, subjectification designates the process by which people become political subjects — not in the sense of being *subjected to* a political regime but in the sense of becoming *agentive subjects* who call into question the "obviousness" of the "allocation of functions and places" in society: "Any subjectification is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place."¹⁹ In other words, subjectification for Rancière is the process by which people do not participate in the existing order but rather contest the categories available to them in that order, so as to inaugurate new categories and change the order itself. This is a proper educational aim in societies that claim to be democratic, that is, open to contestation by a *demos*.

As I have explained elsewhere,²⁰ I agree with Rancière that schools and school systems as a whole are state institutions predicated upon ideas of social order and that they are, therefore, not likely to actively promote subjectification in this sense. However, since becoming a political subject involves the emancipatory assertion and insertion of one's equal capacity and the rupture of an order that failed to recognize that capacity, students do not depend on schools to become political subjects: "People need not wait until their emancipators tell them that they can move; they can make the move right here and right now."²¹ Although an educational institution cannot educate students into political subjectivity, it is possible for subjectification to happen or, as I have put it previously, for democracy to enter in an educational institution in spite of the explicit purposes of socialization and qualification of that institution.²² Both nonformal (extracurricular) and informal education within and outside of the physical spaces of schools can offer students opportunities to experience subjectification in this political sense.

In addition, and more directly related to the mechanics of articulation that I have discussed, the formal curricula of history and civics (especially at the secondary

level) can include the study of political history in a way that focuses not on the *outcomes* of political change, but on the *process* itself, including a view at the level of the political actors and the nomination and articulation of their actions.²³ The scholars on whose work I have drawn for this argument demonstrate this approach: Laclau tells us not just *that Solidarnosc* played an important role in the end of communism in Poland in the 1980s, but rather *how* the catachrestic function of *Solidarnosc* worked. Likewise, Critchley tells us not just *that* Australian Aborigines successfully contested the declaration of *terra nullius*, but what *concrete political actions* were involved, including setting up a beach umbrella on the lawn facing the National Parliament in Canberra in 1972 and naming this umbrella and surrounding tent the “Aboriginal Tent Embassy” (*ID*, 108). And similarly, Rancière tells us not just *that* Auguste Blanqui played a role in the recognition of workers’ lives in nineteenth-century France, but rather recounts in detail *how* Blanqui (during a trial) transformed “working class” identity into a political subjectivity by answering “proletarian” when asked for his profession and, when told this was not a profession, insisting, “It is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights.”²⁴

Political action and change have looked different in different times and places and, as part of a political education that seeks to foster political efficacy and engagement, it is important for students to see a range of concrete ways in which citizens and those who were denied the status of citizen have worked to bring the societies in which they lived closer to what they perceived to be a just social order. It is important for them to see that this political work, different as its context and specifics may have been in each case, has involved the naming and articulation of political demands in some form. In addition, there should be room for students to claim the voice to name and articulate a social demand, and thus to become political subjects rather than remaining objects of the existing social order. Yes, students need to perceive injustices in order to be motivated to act, but in societies as complex as ours, in order not to “throw up their hands and sit on them,” they should also learn to articulate the political demands that result from such ethical perception.

1. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Klas Roth, *Democracy, Education and Citizenship: Towards a Theory on the Education of Deliberative Democratic Citizens* (Stockholm, Sweden: HLS Förlag, 2000).

2. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.

3. Jacques Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement,” trans. Steven Corcoran, *Angelaki* 9, no. 3 (2004): 7.

4. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007), 7. This work will be cited as *ID* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Ken Osborne, “Political Education and Citizenship: Teaching for Civic Engagement,” *Education Canada* 45, no. 1 (2004): 13.

6. See also Claudia Ruitenberg, “Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28, no. 3 (2009): 269–81.

7. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005). This work will be cited as *OPR* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), 105.
9. The other condition is “the instability of the frontiers which separate” these antagonistic forces (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 136). I will not discuss this condition here.
10. CBC News, “Activists’ Tactics Pose Serious Threat to 2010 Games: Analysts,” May 4, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2008/05/04/bc-olympics-security-activists.html>.
11. Ibid.
12. See Janiszewski’s website: <http://www.tajjer.net/eng/index.html>.
13. I am grateful to Tomasz Szkudlarek’s insights on this point.
14. Roger Cohen, “Who Really Brought Down Milosevic?” *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/26/magazine/who-really-brought-down-milosevic.html>.
15. Ian Traynor, “US Campaign Behind the Turmoil in Kiev,” *Guardian*, November 26, 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.usa>.
16. David Lane, “Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 2 (2009): 113–35.
17. See, for example, Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer, “The Limits of Political Efficacy: Educating Citizens for a Democratic Society,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 2 (2006): 289–96.
18. Gert Biesta, “Education After Deconstruction: Between Event and Invention,” in *Derrida, Deconstruction and Politics of Pedagogy*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Gert Biesta (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 99.
19. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 36.
20. Claudia Ruitenberg, “What If Democracy Really Matters?” *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v003n001/a005.shtml>.
21. Gert Biesta, “Toward a New ‘Logic’ of Emancipation: Foucault and Rancière,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 175.
22. Ruitenberg, “What If Democracy Really Matters?”
23. With the study of “historical examples” come questions about historiographic interpretation. These should be included explicitly in the discussion about how different accounts of political events change what we learn about politics and its agents.
24. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 37.