

## On What Premises Do People Engage in Political Life?

Carl Anders Säfström  
*Mälardalen University*

The young are never political enough. At least if by being political we mean being engaged in institutions set up to run political processes in democratic societies. This is a well known “fact” for most Western democracies whose self perception as democratic states are built on the very idea of its people as engaged participants, committed citizens, and, at the very least, active voters. The young are never motivated or interested enough and seem, in an increasing negative spiral, to refuse to act properly as “the demos;” they vote to a lesser extent than earlier generations and they do not in the same way participate in organized party politics. They appear to lack the will of engaging in the public affairs of political community.

This so-called “fact” of disengagement is so repeatedly stated by popular media, politicians, and by political scientists that it appears almost like a self-evident truth of liberal democracy. It is often so taken for granted that one can wonder if it is not a foundational idea for the very understanding of liberal politics, that is, that we cannot think liberal democracy without at the same time establishing the very idea of a people as not being enough engaged, not political enough. If so, the role of a particular view of education is very much at the center of such an understanding, since what such education promises to do is to continuously teach youth knowledge about the functions of an ideal democratic state so that they can become more engaged by knowing how to proceed, by knowing how to express their wills in an organized, rational form.

At the same time, though, youth are given the message that they will simply not learn enough because the ideal state is just that: an ideal, and as a consequence is always somewhere else. Participation in the ideal state is thereby put on hold. It is not about the now in which we are living but about something yet to come. Education becomes the process through which the young are taught that they are being educated for a time in some distant future.

To come to terms with “the motivational deficit” is within this discourse about the very survival of liberal democracy itself. And it is about promoting an understanding of education as the way of solving this problem with *more* education, and *more* learning so that “the young” will step up to the plate when they are ready to do so, when they are educated enough so as to be able to participate as educated political subjects for the benefit of us all. So if there is a motivational deficit when it comes to participating in liberal democracy then there is also a motivational deficit when it comes to education, because it is through education that this fantasy is to be embodied as the truth of one’s life. The problem, however, is that those opportunities to participate are put in a logic of an ever-distant future. The now is not yet. To be a political subject in liberal democracy through education is something always waiting to happen.

Claudia Ruitenberg argues in her essay “Learning to Articulate: From Ethical Motivation to Political Demands” that the problem of how the young can be educated in a way that engages them politically has been dealt with by educational researchers inspired by deliberative democracy. The problem, for Ruitenberg, is that such a perspective of democracy tends to deny “the constitutive nature of disagreement inherent in the deliberative framework itself” and therefore tends to neglect the very dimension of deliberation that *is* truly political. Ruitenberg instead argues that in order to discuss political disengagement and its remedies at all a first premise is to raise political questions, informed by the very antagonistic nature of political phenomena in common life.

Ruitenberg cites Simon Critchley who describes what he sees as the fundamental political question, the “motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life.”<sup>1</sup> Liberal pluralist democracy is not able to motivate people enough so as to take part in those discourses, practices, and institutions through which liberal democracy is constituted. For Critchley, this is due to an ethical deficit, that the lack of political engagement and action is rooted in a lack of ethical motivation. While acknowledging the possibility of such a lack, Ruitenberg argues that this may not be the whole story. For her it is rather the case that although Critchley does include the idea in his argument that ethical and political motivation can be brought together so as to form “a common front, a shared political subjectivity” he does not address how this may be achieved. And it is precisely in relation to this point that Ruitenberg wants to place her argument, because political articulation does not just happen. For Ruitenberg it has to be learned. And what particularly has to be learned, according to Ruitenberg, are “the logic and mechanics of articulation [which] are important political complements to the moral education Critchley advocates.” Or, as she states later in the essay after discussing the relation between articulation and political subjectivity through a reading of Ernesto Laclau, “there is a need for both.”

So what does Ruitenberg suggest for overcoming the deficits of plural liberal democracy, which she defines as the perceived lack of both ethical motivation and a capacity for political articulation? She suggests a type of political education that can overcome both deficits through a “citizenship education that takes the political aspects of citizenship seriously,” that is, an education that does not avoid the deployment of antagonistic forces in play. An education that not only focuses on the outcomes of political change but on the process itself, not on the product of change, but on *how* change was achieved in the course of history.

Such a task is unavoidable for any democratically ordered society that is open to contestation by a *demos* says Ruitenberg. It is unavoidable for a democracy that educates not only for political subjectivity, but which is open for political subjectification to contest the existing order and the categories on which it is built “so as to inaugurate new categories and change the order itself.” But any order is a fiction that deconstructs itself, as Jacques Derrida pointed out, and what we are to do, according to him, is to watch it happen and report on the damages. In other words, we are to return absolute knowledge about an order to its contingent conditions.

The problem, though, is to be able to see and to hear that which is not to be seen or to be heard. In other words, is there a motivational deficit at all or is it the case that it is part of the fantasy we as liberal democrats and educationalists are able to see and hear? Is it enough to “learn” new things in a new way or is the very problem posed already within the fantasy of education within pluralist liberal democracy? What if people *are* politically engaged, motivated, and interested — but are not recognized as such? What if young people very well know the rules of the game but that they have no opportunity to show this within the logic of time inherent to education that places them outside the very idea of participation here and now? What if the very idea of the need to motivate people is fishy to its core? I would say that empirically there is some evidence to suggest that there is something problematic with statements that people are not politically engaged or motivated.

Two Swedish political scientists have just published a book based on interviews with people considered to be indifferent and uninformed, but what they show is the opposite: people knew very well under which conditions they were operating in society and had developed strategies to deal with these.<sup>2</sup> Ignoring organized political life was one of them. That in itself did not hinder them in being ethically motivated or in articulating themselves in political terms in Ruitenberg’s definition, that is, to focus on the antagonistic dimensions of political life. So maybe it is not about learning at all — at least not about teaching the young new ways of being political subjects but about our own attentiveness to the way in which we understand what we see and hear. This means placing attention on our own motivational deficit in articulating political questions outside the very self-understanding of a pluralist liberal democracy that produces the problem in the first place.

---

1. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007).

2. Peter Strandbrink and Linda Åkerström, *Goda medborgare och onda tider? Svensk demokratipolitik och myten om den passiva medborgaren* [Good Citizens and Evil Times? Swedish Democracy Politics and the Myth of the Passive Citizen] (Umeå: H:ström-Text and Kultur, 2010).