Radical Discussions: Agonistic Democratic Education

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INTRODUCTION

Claudia Ruitenberg's recent work on democratic education has spurred an important debate.[1] On the one hand, philosophers of education such as Amy Guttman and Dennis Thompson, and more recently Tomas Englund, draw from John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas to claim that democratic education should be rooted in deliberative competence, consensus practices, and reasonability. Call them the deliberators. Drawing from critiques of this deliberative tradition made by Chantal Mouffe, Ruitenberg calls for a democratic education of adversaries, a pluralistic agonism in education rather than a deliberative reasonability that, according to Mouffe, represses the confrontational forces constitutive of democracy. This educational agonism prioritizes passion, affect, and imagination - all oriented towards disagreement rather than consensus. Others, such as Gert Biesta, have developed this agonist position further. Call them the agonists.

While Ruitenberg gestures towards the praxis of agonistic democratic education using examples of social movements and current events, neither she nor others working in her paradigm have extended her thinking to educational discussion. This essay will bring the tradition of democratic discussion to bear on the debate between the deliberators and agonists, and recommend discussion techniques consistent with the agonist position. These recommendations serve two purposes. First, they respond to one of the deliberators' dismissals of agonism, namely that struggle and conflict are inherent to the deliberative process. Second, the recommendations sharpen the practical differences between a deliberative

and an agonistic democratic education viz. discussion in movements and classrooms.

DELIBERATORS, AGONISTS, AND DISCUSSION

Martin Samuelsson has done important work in synthesizing the deliberators' position. Citing Zsuzsanna Chappell, Dennis Thompson, David Held, and Simone Chambers, he writes:

> Theories of deliberative democracy hold that the essence of democratic politics does not lie in voting and representation but in the common deliberation that underlies collective decision making ... At the core of these theories is the reason-giving requirement: Citizens and their representatives should justify to each other in a process of public deliberation the laws they impose on one another ... In short, a legitimate political order is one that can be justified to all those living under its law.[2]

Law and procedural communication, in the form reason-giving talk, are paramount in deliberative democracy. This focus on procedure carries over into deliberative democratic education. Citing Tomas Englund, Samuelsson summarizes:

> A deliberative educative situation ... is one in which (a) different views are confronted with one another and arguments for them are articulated; (b) there is tolerance and respect for the concrete other, and participants listen to each other's arguments; and (c) there are elements of collective-will formation, a desire to reach consensus or a temporary agreement.[3]

A democratic education distilled from the theory of deliberative democracy

emphasizes argumentation, a kind of civil-civic listening, and consensus. Preparing to vote is the paradigm activity for this democratic education: deliberative democratic education, Samuelsson writes, "emphasises the communicative formation of will and opinion that precedes voting."[4]

Ruitenberg's agonistic democratic education is in stark contrast. Whereas politics for the deliberators is equivalent to lawful and reasonable procedure, "the political" for Chantal Mouffe, writes Ruitenberg, is the realm of activity that lawful and reasonable procedure seeks to limit: "Instead of claiming that deliberative models are not working well enough to contain such conflict," says Ruitenberg, "Mouffe would argue that deliberative models have worked too well, eliminating important possibilities for agonistic, political conflict."[5]

> Politics, for Mouffe, is "the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'." This dimension of "the political" is the opposition or, in Mouffe's words, "antagonism that is inherent in human relations" and "constitutive of human societies."[6]

The democratic education flowing downstream from this notion of the political looks quite different from the deliberators' democratic education. Agonistic democratic education educates for political emotions, fosters and encourages political dispute among conflicting identities, and understands left-right ideological tensions as irresolvable. Deliberators are centrists who value rational resolution, aiming at consensus. They work for an end to partisan polarization, treating contingency as contingent to the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Agonists view politics as struggle all the way down, prioritizing partisanship in the spirit of

protest, embracing contingency. For agonists, institutions should move in rhythm with struggle and difference, rather than against struggle and difference. Mouffe uses the notion of we/they to illustrate the difference: deliberators seek to eliminate a sense of we/they divisions in democratic politics, using institutions to dissolve it; while agonists embrace the sense of we/they divisions, and orient democratic institutions towards preventing the we/they from becoming destructive. In a word, agonists understand democracy with a spirit of protest, deliberators understand it with a spirit of procedure.

Deliberators argue that this split relies on a distinction without a difference (more on this later). The proof should be in the pedagogical pudding. I will focus on educational discussion as a test case. Participants speaking and listening in turns about shared questions is a frequent feature of classrooms and movements. Furthermore, there is a long research tradition arguing that discussion and democracy go hand in hand. David Bridges was the first to trace the democratic heritage of group talk that addresses questions in common, tracking the lineage of discussion and democracy from Pericles to John Milton to John Stuart Mill. Nicholas Burbules, building on Bridges' work in the adjacent field of dialogue studies, notes that discussion is the practice of democracy.[7] Diana Hess argues that prohibiting discussion is akin to prohibiting democracy itself, and Walter Parker has claimed that discussion is a first form of democratic socialization.[8] Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon elaborates how interpretive discussion can develop the democratic values of tolerance and openness.[9] Further, in their recent work, Hess and Paula McAvoy advocate controversial issue discussions as a key form of political education for democracy.[10]

The discursive democracy tradition rarely converges with the debate between the deliberators and agonists. When it does, democratic

discussion is theorized exclusively as deliberation. Samuelsson provides a typology of deliberative classroom discussion, for example, extending the deliberators' arguments to generate three features of a deliberative discussion: reason-giving, willingness to listen, and reaching consensus. Similarly, Hess and McAvoy in their recent work look at deliberative discussion techniques used in United States high schools, focusing on how students talk about positions on controversial political issues, such as abortion, through mock policy debates and activities mirroring the legislative process. Hess and McAvoy cite Thompson and Guttman explicitly. We have to imagine the agonists would disagree with this pedagogy, and that their discussion pedagogy would be substantively different than the deliberators'. Yet this has not necessarily been the case in the agonist literature.

THE AGONISTS' DISCUSSION PROBLEM

Ruitenberg gestures towards agonistic discussion in "Conflict, Affect, and the Political: On Disagreement as Democratic Capacity." Following Simon Critchley, Ruitenberg calls for an "inductive political education" where "we respond ... to concrete situations in which we perceive an injustice, such as a labour strike, an act of police brutality, or the discriminatory treatment of migrant workers."[11] Drawing from Yannis Stavrakakis, Ruitenberg stipulates that this inductive education should engage with social imaginaries and contested identities. Ruitenberg then gives an example of what this inductive education of social imaginary might look like in a discussion:

> ... it was a tragedy that, in December 2008, a 47-year-old woman burnt to death when she lit candles in her makeshift shelter under a shopping cart on Davie Street in Vancouver, Canada. It was also a stark reminder of the

injustice faced by homeless people whose only choice
seems to be the cold street ...To take this tragic event
as the point of departure for a discussion of social
imaginaries would involve a discussion of broad political
values and commitments - to individual liberty, social
equality, and individual and collective responsibilities
for mental health care and housing. Different from ap-
proaches that might focus on the procedural or policy
aspects, the emotional responses to this event would be
an explicit part of this discussion.[12]

An inductive political education that engages social imaginaries
and responds to concrete situations of perceived injustice would look
like a discussion about poverty. This discussion would include broad po-
litical values and emotional responses to the event as "an explicit part."
Ruitenberg notes that "these emotional responses are what make some
educators nervous to discuss 'charged' events such as the one I described
above."[13] An agonistic discussion takes up charged events, which might
make some educators nervous, bringing controversy and passion into
the classroom discussion.

Ruitenberg is not at odds with the discursive tradition in recom-
mending such a discussion, nor is she at odds with the deliberative tradition.
Controversy is uncontroversial in these literatures. Hess advocates facil-
itating controversial issue discussions about emotionally-charged topics,
Haroutunian-Gordon incorporates the back-and-forth interpretability
of textual meaning as central to her pedagogy, and Bridges called for
disagreement during educational discussion, a point he takes from John
Stuart Mill. Disagreement and conflicting points of view are expected
in the discursive democracy literature and in deliberative democratic
education. Ruitenberg's agonistic discussion thus appears equivalent to

discussions recommended by deliberators whose philosophy of democracy is contrary to hers. Deliberators have pointed out this equivalence when responding to Ruitenberg's agonistic critique. Englund, for instance, defends the deliberators by writing that disagreement is a built-in feature of deliberation: deliberators seeking consensus come from different points of view, and so there must be struggle and controversy when expressing those views during deliberation.[14] Claiming the Mouffian point against the deliberative tradition draws a distinction without a difference, Englund calls out Ruitenberg's critique of democratic education as unjust and misplaced. The discussive tradition somewhat confirms Englund's point here. Though that literature may not draw from the affective and adversarial epistemology set out by Chantal Mouffe, agonism is second-nature to those thinking about discussion as democratic education. When the philosophical rubber meets the pedagogical road in a formal discussion (be it in a classroom, office, or movement space), there is little disagreement about the need for disagreement over charged topics. Agreeing to disagree during discussion problematically aligns agonists with the deliberators. I call this a discussion problem for the agonist's democratic education.

Looking at this problem more closely, there is not an exact equivalence between agonists and deliberators when it comes to pedagogical recommendations. First, their chosen philosophers and intellectual discourses are distinct (e.g., Mouffe versus Rawls); second, Ruitenberg and Mouffe explicitly state that emotion and passion and conflict constitute democracy itself, whereas Englund, for instance, argues that passions are extraneous and disruptive. These are significant differences and points of contention. Yet the agonists still face a discussion problem when it comes to praxis. While the deliberators' and agonists' philosophies are different, and while the content of their discussions may differ thematically, their discussion praxes end up looking the same in the literature:

they agree that disagreeing is a good thing during discussion. One could imagine Englund endorsing Ruitenberg's suggested discussion about poverty in Vancouver, for example, and bringing in divergent positions to that discussion.

How can agonists maintain our critique of deliberative democratic education if our pedagogical recommendations for discussion end up looking more or less the same as the deliberators'? What does agonism look like during discussion, if we do not want to slip into deliberation?

RADICAL DISCUSSIONS

Ruitenberg and Englund's disagreements give clues. Ruitenberg writes that "emotional responses" should be an "explicit part" of the discussion, and that young people "should be given opportunities to experience this kind of disagreement and the affective commitments that drive it."[15] Deliberators on the other hand feel uncomfortable with emotion during discussion. Englund claims that teachers should "hesitate in promoting" passionate positions, and that they should stick to what is "suitable" during classroom discussion.[16] For an agonistic discussion true to Ruitenberg's call, one that applies her thinking to the discussive democratic tradition, teachers should promote passionate talk about issues in ways that transgress the boundaries of suitability, rather than focusing on dispassionate utterances within the constraints of suitable contents or forms of speech. In the remainder of the essay I use these differences to operationalize protocols for discussions - what I call radical discussions - that fit the agonistic model of democratic education Ruitenberg has staked out.

There are two aspects to consider for any discussion protocol, radical or otherwise: form and content of speech. Form is how people

speak and listen, in what sequence, and the types of things they say (questions, arguments, debates, digressions); whereas content is the particular words, texts, questions, and issues they talk about. One can give a lecture on non-hierarchical pedagogy for instance, and the form and content of this pedagogy are at odds. Alternatively, the way a group speaks and listens can vary in important ways as the content of their discussions stays the same: a recitation about the Movement for Black Lives is different than a conversation or debate or interrogation of that movement. Radical discussions, to be distinct from deliberative discussions, should be distinct in both their form and content.

In a forthcoming response to Samuelsson's 2016 essay, I critique deliberative discussion from the Ruitenbergian position, first by citing the importance of an equal and various sequence of turns.[17] In an equal and various sequence, no single person repeatedly follows up comments, and each participant has equal opportunity to have the floor. Socratic dialogues tend not to have an equal and various sequence of moves, for instance: Socrates follows up most comments, insisting on being the questioner. I have also argued elsewhere that when a single voice dominates discussion, one voice remains the sole focus of attention, or when a facilitator refuses to permit other patterns or scripts during interaction, a monarchy forms in the discursive order. This monarchy makes masses out of participants rather than creating groups with them.[18] Given that the agonist perspective calls for multiple and plural collective identities, an agonistic facilitator would want to make sure that multiple people address each other in a mix of ways, rather than letting the same participants constantly address and be addressed by others. A deliberative facilitator would most likely want everyone to speak at appropriate times in specifically suitable ways, even when permitting student-to-student talking. While it is a small thing to permit participants to speak amongst themselves in a mix of moves, doing so can make a big difference in the

rhythm, feeling, and outcome of the discussion. I contend that those qualities align with Ruitenberg's agonism: discussions permitting a mix of moves and a diverse distribution of authority are radical discussions. Two pedagogies work towards this mixture of moves during discussion: Harkness teaching, a form of student-centered discussion found mostly in elite private schools in the United States; and horizontal pedagogy, a set of techniques that emerged during the Occupy Wall Street movement in the New York City and were influenced by psychoanalysis and the work of Brazilian philosopher Walter O. Kohan.[19]

Continuing with discussive form, Ariel Sarid's distinction between deliberative and deconstructive dialogue is helpful for parsing the features of agonistic discussion from deliberative discussion. (The term dialogue here is not meant as a term of art. While it sometimes signals a related research tradition - from Socrates to Martin Buber, Paulo Freire, Mikhail Bahktin, Jonathan Lear, and the Philosophy for Children paradigm - I intend the word here as a synonym for discussion.) For Sarid, deconstructive dialogue takes its cue from Jacques Derrida, whereas communicative discourse (the deliberative correlate) follows Jürgen Habermas. While similar to, though importantly distinct figure from, Chantal Mouffe, Ruitenberg has worked extensively with Derrida and the deconstructive tradition, as has Mouffe. I argue the qualities of deconstructive discussion Sarid elaborates fit well with agonistic democratic education.

Whereas autonomy is the deliberative tradition's basic value, a deconstructive discussion, for Sarid, prioritizes difference and a plurality of voices, a "responsibility for preserving the otherness of the Other."[20] The favored personality attributes, or the personal qualities, that deconstructive discussion most encourages, are creativity and openness, such that there is a tendency to avoid structured or commonly-held perceptions, a tendency to accept unusual ideas, and an inclination towards flexibility

and experimentation. This creative openness stands in contrast to the deliberative attribute of agreeableness. The pedagogical orientation of the facilitator in a deconstructive discussion is permissive, meaning that the facilitator places authority on the otherness of the other, though they will not be permissive with respect to domination, confronting ethical and practical dilemmas stemming from tensions created by the goal of lessening their authority as facilitator. Rather than the deliberative tradition's emphasis on communicative rationality, the dialogical process of a deconstructive discussion is an open-ended one, seeking to promote changes in comprehension or attitude toward a given concept or opinion, as well as achieving during the discussion a sense of justice grounded on the principles of friendliness, openness, and responsibility to the "Other." Similarly, whereas the end-result of deliberation is consensus, the end-result of a deconstructive dialogue is divergent change in meanings. Finally, most appropriately aligned with Ruitenberg's political education, the political orientation and organizational structure of a deconstructive discussion is not deliberative democracy but rather a radical democracy yet-to-come: the sustenance of irreducible singularity, inclusion of difference, and the ongoing dissolution of permanent hierarchy and authority.[21]

What should a radical discussion with these qualities look, sound, and feel like? A mix of moves, as described above, is an important suggestion for the form of such a radical discussion. But there is also the question of content. The Black Marxist feminist bell hooks is a key resource, as she includes activities and provocations for classroom discussion in her work. In *Teaching Community*, hooks writes a chapter on "Talking Race and Racism," making reference to teachers' "reluctance" to confront white supremacy, particularly when students openly claim that race is no longer an issue in the United States. She describes an activity she does in class that readies the ground for meaningful discussions about race:

In classroom settings I have often listened to groups of students tell me that racism really no longer shapes the contours of our lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that "we are all just people." Then a few minutes later I give them an exercise. I ask if they were about to die and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, a black female, or black male, which identity would they choose. Each time I do this exercise, most individuals, irrespective of gender or race invariably choose whiteness, and most often white maleness. Black females are the least chosen. When I ask students to explain their choice they proceed to do a sophisticated analysis of privilege based on race (with perspectives that take gender and class into consideration). This disconnect between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of privilege and their unconscious understanding is a gap we have to bridge, an illusion that must be shattered before a meaningful discussion of race and racism can take place.[22]

This which-identity-would-you-choose exercise readies the ground for "meaningful discussion of race and racism,"[23] since it takes a consensus about the non-existence of racial inequality and unearths an unconscious awareness about its existence. The exercise asks students to engage racism structurally through their identities and unconscious preferences. hooks writes the word "meaningful" to describe the kind of discussion for which this activity prepares participants, but "radical" also fits, given its usage in this essay. hooks goes on to mention another important content-related point for radical discussions. On the subject of challenging racist speech in formal settings, she observes that sometimes when a person of color challenges a white person's racist speech, the

group will treat the utterer of racist remarks as a victim and the person of color as a perpetrator. She goes on to speculate that:

> People often tell me that they do not share openly and candidly their thoughts about white-supremacist thought and racism for fear that they will say the wrong thing. And yet when this reason is interrogated it usually is shown to cover up the fear of conflict, the belief that saying the wrong thing will generate conflict, bad feeling, or lead to counterattack. Groups where white folks are in the majority often insist that race and racism does not really have much meaning in today's world because we are all so beyond caring about it. I ask them why they then have so much fear about speaking their minds. Their fear, their censoring silence, is indicative of the loaded meaning race and racism have in our society.[24]

This passage brings up several important pieces of content that radical discussions would include. The first is explicitly challenging racist speech. When a participant says something that is perceived to be, or actually is, racist, whether a microaggression or an overtly aggressive comment, it is important to stop the class and deal with that comment head on, perhaps even making it the topic of the discussion in place of the planned topic or activity (a facilitation rule might be to ask hurt participants to say "ouch," to which the speaker can say "oops," and a conversation ensues). The second important content-related concern in this passage is working through the fear of speaking one's mind about issues such as racism, and talking about it despite its apparent unsuitability. Radical discussions promote talk about how participants ourselves are subject to capitalist exploitation, gender oppression, colonialism, ableism, and so on, rather than repress the subject of our own subjection in the

name of suitable speech.

Race is only one social category that influences social experience, however, and the intersectionality paradigm led by Kimberlé Crenshaw is an important framework to use when selecting contents for radical discussion. Intersectionality research provides excellent content for radical discussions, exposing the way social categories such as race, gender, and class interlock and commingle in social practices. As an example, one could create a syllabus using intersectional research on educational practices of interest to teachers. Intersectional research on school shootings, bullying, cyberbullying, Black parents' school strategies for their children, solidarity programs for Latina middle schoolers, zero tolerance policies, inclusive education, and physical education, can show the agonistic pluralism inherent in those educational practices.[25]

There are many resources available for form and content in radical discussions, too many to fully elaborate here. The website *Teaching for Change* recently posted a collection of resources for teaching about Black Lives Matter.[26] The listening working group led by Leonard Waks writes about important practices and theories of listening, and specifically noteworthy are Ashley Taylor's work on Megan Boler's pedagogy of discomfort and Suzanne Rice's work on Freirian listening.[27] The edited volume *Critical Pedagogy in the 21st Century* is a treasure trove of provocative materials that teachers and students of agonistic democracy can use in classrooms and movement spaces.[28]

CONCLUSION

A burden of proof now falls on the deliberators. They must show that agonists recommending the radical discussions elaborated here still rely on a distinction without a difference when distinguishing their

model of democratic education from that of the deliberative tradition. If agonists rely on a distinction without a difference, then deliberators should welcome radical discussions that permit cross talk between participants in a mix of moves; deconstructive discussions that emphasize difference, otherness, and struggle with authority in the spirit of protest; discussions that unsettle participants' social imaginaries, confront micro and macro aggressive speech, and break through illusions about racism, sexism, and classism intersectionally. In my estimation, deliberators do not welcome such discussions, but I look forward to discussing the matter: President Donald Trump's election in the United States, amidst a global trend toward conservative, populist, and repressive nationalisms, calls for serious reflection on how we educate for democracy today.

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2 Martin Samuelsson, "Education for Deliberative Democracy: A Typology of Classroom Discussions," *Democracy and Education* 24, no. 1 (2016): 1-9, 2.

3 Martin Samuelsson, "Education for Deliberative Democracy," 3; Cf. Tomas Englund, "Deliberative Communication: A Pragmatist Proposal," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38, no. 5 (2006): 503-520.

4 Samuelsson, "Education for Deliberative Democracy," 2.

5 Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries," 4.

6 Ruitenberg, "Conflict, Affect and the Political," 40.

7 David Bridges, *Education, Democracy & Discussion* (New York: University Press of America, 1979); Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

8 Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Ddiscussion*

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11 Ruitenberg, "Conflict, Affect and the Political," 52.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Tomas Englund, "To Live Educationally: To Develop Curriculum in line with Cosmopolitan Inheritance," (paper presented at American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual conference, Vancouver, BC, 2012): 1-12.

15 Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries," 52.

16 Englund, "To Live Educationally," 9.

17 Samuelsson, "Education for Deliberative Democracy," 5; David I. Backer, "The Critique of Deliberative Discussion: A Response to Martin Samuelsson," *Democracy and Education* 25, no. 1 (2017).

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21 Ibid., 936-940.

22 bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003), 25.

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24 Ibid., 28

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