

Humanity and Veracity: Democracy and Education

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What special property makes democracy, despite its shortcomings¹, worth our collective attention and dedicated effort? What is contained within the philosophic atmosphere surrounding Gert Biesta's statement, "there is nothing rational about democracy – but [it] is more driven by a desire for the particular mode of human togetherness" (2011, 152)? These questions form the basis for this paper, which seeks to understand some of the valuable features of democracy from a radical constructivist perspective² – a perspective where: "knowledge is not passively received but built up by the cognizing subject; the function of cognition is adaptive and serve the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality" (Von Glasersfeld, 1995, 18). Most of this paper will draw from the works of French Philosopher Jacques Rancière and Dutch Educational Philosopher Gert Biesta, but concepts from Chantal Mouffe as well as Thomas Christiano will also be included.

Much of Rancière's work related to education follows his consideration of Jean-Joseph Jacotot's early 19th century pedagogical experiments in Louvain, Belgium³. Jacotot's time in Louvain served as a growing foundation for the constructivist approach to education in Europe and to further refine his own method of 'Intellectual Emancipation.' Over 100 years later, Rancière, pushing against the increasingly scientific reconceptualization of Marxism, leveraged Jacotot's epistemic egalitarianism⁴ to challenge Althusser's assertion that state-provided education would primarily serve the ideological interest of the state, and that such structuralism would give way to authoritarianism. Jacotot's educational method served to resist the domination of ideological reason by challenging the positivist paradigm and included the notion that all men have equal intelligence, with differences arising from the natural diversity of individual intellectual desires. Rancière affirms this equality⁵. Both Jacotot and Rancière take this equality as an a priori condition, not as arising from participation in educational institutions or activities.

Rancière's opposition to Althusser's conception of state apparatuses, including education, is not on a moral basis. The moral righteousness of education, and other institutions, is not argued. Rancière's institutional questioning occurs at the functional level, through what Chantal Mouffe might call 'political terms.' Biesta brings Rancière and Mouffe into relationship,

“[Mouffe] argues that a democratic society ‘cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries’—but emphasizes that exclusions should be envisaged ‘in political and not in moral terms’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 120). This means that when some demands are excluded, it is not because they are evil, ‘but because they challenge the institutions constitutive of the democratic political association’ (ibid., p. 121). However—and this ‘however’ is crucial—for Mouffe ‘the very nature of those institutions’ is also part of the debate. This is what she has in mind with her ideas of a ‘conflictual consensus’ – which she describes as a ‘consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, [but] dissent about their interpretation’ (ibid.).” (Biesta, 2011, p. 146).

Rancière, by way of Jacotot's intellectual emancipation, supported education but challenged the positivist paradigm that proclaimed the existence of a knowable universal truth based in an independent reality, which formed the 'nature' of educational institutions. If such a truth could be known, by the values of reason and rationality, common to deliberative democracy⁶, all political systems, including democracy, would be bound to authoritarian ends and would undermine the individual's equal position of epistemic authority – at least in cases of “irrational” (in the positivist sense) divergence. That is not to suggest that Rancière did not believe in truth or reality, his belief is clear: “Truth, Rancière tells us, is a whole, but one that cannot be told” (Means, 2011, p. 35)⁷. For Rancière the positivist paradigm represents the order and stability of

police logic, which he defined as ‘an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task’” (Rancière as cited in Biesta, 2011, p. 144). The antithesis to the police order for Rancière is politics: a process that interrupts and reconfigures the police order. This process is marked by acts of subjectification. Within these acts, individuals dissent to the consensus of police logic. Rancière’s dissensus can be understood in conflictual interpretations of ethico-political consensual values, as put forth by Mouffe, such as rationality and impartiality. Biesta clarifies this limiting qualification on individual political subjectification:

“...the argument against an [ordering] understanding of democratic politics is not an argument for total anarchy; it is not an argument for saying that any interruption of the existing order is an instance of democracy. Rancière is very clear that dissensus is about the confrontation of the logic of the police with the logic of equality, just as for Mouffe any redrawing of the existing political hegemony always needs to take place with reference to the principles of liberty and equality” (Biesta, 2011, p. 152).

The conflict within the consensual values of rationality and impartiality originates within Jacotot’s constructivist intellectual emancipation, where epistemic authority shifts from a universal position to an individual or particular position. Rationality and impartiality consensually remain the basis that an individual uses to translate empirical experiences into particular political claims. This shift from a positivist rationality to a constructivist rationality, is what is represented by the earlier statement of “irrational” divergence from positivist authoritarian truth. This is different from an irrational constructivist claim, which would not be permitted to motivate Rancièrian acts of subjectification.

If the core of democratic politics for Rancière is the reconfiguration of the police order, then not only must intellectual emancipation be supported, but the expression of resulting subjectivities must be as well. Means (2011) highlights the principle Rancière uses to link intellectual emancipation to subjectification – veracity. Veracity is framed as the ‘ethical ground of intellectual emancipation,’ “the will to question and express thought outside a position of mastery... the desire to understand and to be understood... the will to share and to act upon this desire in solidarity with others” (35). Since a universal truth is unknowable - “cannot be told” – Rancièrean subjects must choose to act without a grasp of universal mastery. They must rely only on the impartiality of partial truths. This is inherently flawed, and is also recognized by Biesta and Rancière, “...any expression of universality is necessarily unstable: a result of social struggle” (Means, 2011, p. 40).

Stability is a property of the police order and is anti-democratic, since democratic politics arise only in the acts of subjectification that destabilize and reconfigure the order⁸. The flaw contained within the transformation of particular claims to universal claims provides the grounds on which the next moment of dissensus can be enacted. The inevitable remnants of dissensus, are vital to Mouffe’s conception of politics. When discussing the liberal ‘sacralization of consensus’ Mouffe states, “But this is to miss a crucial point, not only about the primary reality of strife in social life, but also about the integrative role that conflict plays in modern democracy...consensus is indeed necessary, but it must be accompanied by dissent” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 113). Veracity then translates dissensus and agonism, which remains unresolved by the elevation of a particular claim to the universal by impartial application of partial truths, into acts of subjectification and the rebirth of democratic politics.

Jacotot's intellectual emancipation begets Rancièrian dissensus due to both the inherent antagonism in human relations and the difference in constructive human experiences, which by the ethical ground of veracity begets subjectification. Subjectification uses fallible logic to transform a particular claim into an agonistic universal claim, which is resolved by Mouffe's democratic politics (or "ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual" (Biesta, 2011)). This is not to confuse democratic politics with the police order, or with seeking a return to the police order. Mouffe's institutional democratic politics is also distinctly different from Rancière's acts of democratic politics. To Rancière, 'democracy is, properly speaking, the symbolic institution of the political in form of the power of those who are not entitled to exercise power – a rupture in the order of legitimacy and domination' (Racière and Panagia, 2000, p. 124)." But they are able to co-exist, "...politics occur because subjects engage in acts of dissensus – forms of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting – that enable their verification as equal subjects and in turn reconfigure the social coordinates out of which they emerge" (Means, 2011, p. 32).

Once democratic political power has been exercised the police order may begin to re-emerge. Feasibly, this forms an iterative foundation of social construction, whereby a police thesis is challenged by a (or multiple) political antithesis and synthesis is reached by democratic acts and institutions. As the police order re-emerges, the unresolved components of the political antithesis continue to serve as a basis for future and ongoing subjectification. Mouffe cautions that this thesis-antithesis duality should only be seen as the site of agonistic conflict and not as a political binary. As a conflictual site there may be many agonistic points of view present. The important aspect of the plurality to Mouffe is that each point of view is philosophically

coherent⁹. The demand for philosophic coherence is a social constructivist echo of the earlier expectation of individual rationality.

The iterative social construction of coherent knowledge and individual rationality – a democratic principle of intellectual emancipation – exist in perpetual tension with one another. Given Rancière’s desire to resist the scientific reconceptualization of Marxism and the framing of institutions as oppressive state apparatuses, intended to replicate the police order, a Rancièrian anti-oppressive educational system “...would require intellectual emancipation to become a structuring principle” (Means, 2011, p. 43). For Rancière this becomes a pedagogically undefined program¹⁰, that encourages a divergent agonism maintaining the democratic potentiality of subjective acts not taken, including those on behalf of emancipated thoughts not had – particularly when such exclusion has been imposed by police logic.

Biesta and Rancière both support this anarchic re-conception of education, rooted in the radical constructivist belief of epistemic egalitarianism. This is in direct opposition to the more traditional archic, or ordering, conception of education, rooted in positivist police logic. Where radical constructivism brings Rancièrian democratic subjectification and Mouffe’s agonism into educational spaces, traditional education maintains an authoritarian “banking” style of education, predicated on the expertise of the teacher and the incompetence of the student. It is not that Rancière questions the expertise of teachers, more accurately he elevates the expertise of students to match it. Biesta resists this equality by introducing a concept of maturity, whereby teachers curate experiences for students – this ‘maturity’ challenges educational philosophies which disregard the experience and maturity of educators. Biesta captures the aims of educator maturity in curating constructive experiences:

“Learning here is not about the acquisition of knowledge, skills, competencies or dispositions but has to do with an ‘exposure’ to and engagement with the experiment of democracy. It is this very engagement that is subjectifying. And while individuals will definitely learn from this, they cannot really learn for this precisely because the essence of democratic politics is not ‘archic’ (Biesta, 2011, p. 152).

Even the best teachers cannot comprehend all of the educational inputs of each student nor can they predict the reflective lessons garnered from any specific experience. Biesta refers to this fallibility of education as a “weakness” that is a “beautiful risk” enabling the growth of democratic potentials by the increased opportunity for student subjectification. Biesta’s choice to describe this re-conception of education as “weak” is compared to “strong” education, that socializes students into the police order¹¹, often driven by state policy, curriculum, and pedagogical choices – aligned to the Althusserian concept of a state apparatus.

This anarchic education, which encourages students to engage in acts of subjectification, gives way to a similarly anarchic definition of citizenship, which increases the available democratic potentialities available for integration into coherent socially constructed philosophies – supporting the diversity of Mouffe’s plurality. But, how does a divergent, agonistic, plural democracy, supported by anarchic constructivist education answer the initial questions of this paper: What special property makes democracy, despite its shortcomings, worth our collective attention and dedicated effort? What is contained within the philosophic atmosphere surrounding Gert Biesta’s statement, “there is nothing rational about democracy – but [it] is more driven by a desire for the particular mode of human togetherness” (2011, 152)?

While Mouffe cautions that moral arguments are commonly used to displace politics, Christiano¹² harkens to an approach to democracy predicated on human dignity, valuing, and

communal belonging that invites a negative conception of morality which encourages the individual to recreate individual moral authority as an ethic of equality. Christiano's argument begins with 'humanity' - a "person's capacity to recognize, appreciate, engage with, harmonize with, and produce intrinsic goods" (2008, 14) – and then places the individual in community, where the relational qualities of "Social justice, knowledge, art, friendship as well as the appreciation and enjoyment of valuable things are products of self-conscious activity" (14) emerge. Christiano argues that these relational qualities emerge naturally, by the self-conscious will of the individual as they recognize, appreciate, engage with, and harmonize with the intrinsic goods of others. "It is important that a person have the sense of being connected with other people in the sense that she can appreciate what they are doing and can experience some sense of identification with their actions and achievements" (91).

Here the answer begins to take shape. The special property immanent to a divergent, agonistic, plural democracy, supported by anarchic constructivist education, is humanity. Working forward from this special property: An individual's self-perceived capacity for producing and relating to intrinsic goods is judged efficacious by their veracity. Together, veracity and humanity become directed toward subjectifying acts, when intellectual emancipation is socially supported – as educationally described by Biesta and Rancière – and yield a democratic plural polity that confronts the police order. It is not possible, as Rancière and Biesta have shown, to move forward from an inherently anarchic humanity and arrive at an alternative conception of democracy and education. Archic police logic, and positivist education suppress the uniqueness of humanity by foreclosing intellectual emancipation and applying a moralizing truth, as cautioned by Mouffe. Equality, as an a priori condition recognizes humanity and feeds the democratic potential.

Endnotes

- 1: Democracy discourages long-term planning across short-term electoral cycles (Linz, 1998) “Democracy’s Time Constraints” in *International Political Science Review* 19, 1, 19-37; enables a form of oppositional electoral politics that does not seek resolution (Mouffe, 2000) “The Democratic Paradox”; and often fail to operationalize coherent proactive strategies, preferring reactive spectacles (Spurling, 2020) “The Peril of Modern Democracy: Short-term thinking in a long-term world.”
- 2: The radical constructivist perspective employed through the paper has a significant conceptual genealogy best presented by Ernst Von Glasersfeld in “Radical Constructivism: A way of knowing and learning” (1995).
- 3: Jean-Joseph Jacotot was hired by the University of Louvain in Belgium to teach French to Flemish-speaking students. The pedagogical experiment was established by Jacotot’s lack of familiarity with the Flemish language and the student’s lack of familiarity with the French language. The classroom necessarily became a space of co-constructed knowledge and meaning as Jacotot learned Flemish and the students learned French. Von Glaserfeld (ibid.) expands on the importance of native language in the formation of paradigmatic worldviews. The process of language acquisition is a democratic act that ruptures these otherwise stable worldviews.
- 4: Epistemic egalitarianism is used here in a manner similar to humanity (Christiano, 2008) – the equal ability of individuals to act as independent creators in the realm of value.
- 5: “Rancière’s philosophy begins first by verifying the fundamental capacity of all to think, speak, and act as equals” (Means, 2011, p. 31).
- 6: According to Elster, “democracy is about the giving and taking of arguments by participants ‘who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality’ (Elster, 1998, p. 8)” (Biesta,

2011, p. 147). While Rancière expresses opposition to deliberative democracy, “democratic politics is precisely not about ‘the opposition of interests or opinions between social parties’ (Rancière, 2003, p. 225); it is precisely not ‘the consultation of the various parties of society concerning their respective interests’” (Ibid. as cited in Biesta, 2011), the values of rationality and impartiality, via Mouffe’s ‘conflictual consensus,’ may be preserved.

7: It appears as though Rancière is borrowing from an apophatic gnostic tradition, referred to in some places as negative theology. Further discussion on this concept can be found in “A Philosophy of the Unsayable” (2014) by William Franke.

8: Rancière’s subjectifying, act-based democracy extends the anti-democratic label to any institution that is designed to displace politics, including laws; “... the law always stands in confrontation with processes (democratic and otherwise) that exist necessarily outside its domain” (Means, 2011, p. 40); neoliberal institutions in general; “Neoliberalism is thus imagined to foreclose politicization by denying the translation of private problems (the particular) into common (universal) concerns. It does so by individualizing politics...” (Means, 2011, p. 38); and some political theories; “...political theories and philosophies in which it is argued that politics is only for those who are like-minded – those who subscribe to a basic set of rules and values – actually contribute to a displacement of politics rather than that they are able to capture the ‘essence’ of democratic politics” (Biesta, 2011, p. 143).

9: In discussing the negative impacts of philosophic incoherence in agonistic political relationships, Mouffe shares, “the result is not a more mature, reconciled society without sharp divisions, but the growth of other types of collective identities around religious, nationalist, or ethnic forms of identification. In other words, when democratic confrontation disappears, the political in its antagonistic dimension manifests itself through other channels” (Mouffe, 2000, p.

114). “Once it is acknowledged that this type of agonistic confrontation is what is specific to a pluralist democracy, we can understand why such a democracy requires the creation of collective identities around clearly differentiated positions as well as the possibility to choose between real alternatives. If this framework does not exist or is weakened, the process of transformation of antagonism into agonism is hindered, and this can have dire consequences for democracy”

(Mouffe, 2000, p. 117). A similar sentiment can be found in Nancy Rosenblum’s (2008) “On the Side of the Angels: An appreciation of parties and partisanship.”

10: “This is to say that to provide a prescriptive program or method for citizenship education is to enter into the field of the police both at the level of policy and pedagogy” (Means, 2011, p. 45). Von Glasersfeld (1995), “as radical constructivism holds that there is never only one right way, it could not produce a fixed teaching procedure. At best it may provide the negative half of a strategy” (177).

11: “Strong” education has been in use since Ancient Greece to educate students on expected “habits, values, and practices of citizenship” (Means, 2011, p. 41).

12: Thomas Christiano’s (2008) “The Constitution of Equality” provides an ethical and moral investigation into the basis of democracy. While much of Christiano’s argument is incongruent with Rancière – i.e.: “The problem of disagreement is particularly important when we consider that in order for a society to establish justice among its members, it must do so in a way that imposes a single unitary system of law on the whole of the society” (Ibid., 78), a reordering of equality and democracy, such that equality is an a priori condition and not a goal of democracy (as articulated by Rancière’s conception of an anarchic moment of subjectification over a formal and archic institutional/electoral conception of democracy), would permit Christiano’s positive

moral argument to be applied deontologically in the manner of Rancière, rather than teleologically which Christiano does originally.

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