

Radical Discussions/Radical Subjectivities

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INTRODUCTION

In “Radical Discussions,” Backer responds to what he has referred to as the “discussion problem” faced by agonists. As I see it, Backer expresses two disparate but connected facets of this problem. The first is quite simply that while deliberators have multiple practical examples to draw from, agonists are left, for the most part, to the realms of theory and imagination. The second facet of the problem lies in the divergences in how the deliberators and the agonists express the ends of democracy. As Backer illustrates, while agonists might take the streets in protest and chant “This is what democracy looks like!,” deliberators might engage in public policy debates, perhaps articulating in their deliberations that such debates are what democracy looks like. Importantly, he points out that while the topics covered in a controversial discussion may overlap, the boundaries of what the deliberators and agonists view as productive or even permissible may differ substantially. It is the question of how to negotiate multiple allegiances and how to make productive the messiness of emotion that plague the agonists. While Backer considers his essay an exploration of potential protocols to elucidate what agonism “looks like” during discussion, I wonder if we might not take a moment to consider what it “does.” I would like to propose that in carrying out radical discussions, as Backer outlines, we are confronting and forging new political identities through what Gert Biesta has labeled “subjectification.”¹ The discussion problem that agonists face, and that Backer has spoken to, is the question of playing with political identities in a way that liberates us from liberalism’s narrative/discursive restrictions. The task is therefore of re-envisioning and reimagining discussion in light of a radical democratic subjectivity — a formation of identity that embraces antagonism, plurality, and passion.

Backer’s essay has become more relevant since it was written. The

outcome of the 2016 American election is being felt less as a reverberation and more as continuous series of tidal waves, punishing the Left (in its multiple forms), and inciting resistances. An important piece that lies at the center of these ongoing and persistent tidal waves is the question of radical discussion: How we speak to one another? What are the limitations of our discussions? With whom do we speak and how do audience, environment, or platform shift both content and form of discussion? Of the many conclusions that can be drawn around the outcome of America's most recent election, one is indisputable: our collective ability to listen, respond, and discuss is fractured. Surprise, confusion, and even disgust felt by the outcome of this election can be explained, at least in part, by a chronic inability and unwillingness to discuss in the way that Backer is proposing. This is what makes Backer's work particularly significant in this moment.

PASSION AND THE POLITICAL

As I read Backer's work, he is calling for a practice/formation of political identity through radical discussion. In this section I frame Backer's notion of radical discussion as a practice of political identity heavily informed by political emotion, specifically passion. As Backer points out, the debate over the utility of political emotion distinguishes the agonists from the deliberators, and it is this distinction that Backer responds to. What I would like to consider here is the possibility of Backer's work speaking more squarely to the overall radical democratic project of extending the ways in which deliberative democracy has come to be understood and enacted.

The central project of Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism is that of tracing a character of political conduct informed by the root principles of democracy. "What we share and what makes us fellow citizens in a liberal democratic regime is not a substantive idea of the good but a set of political principles specific to such a tradition: freedom and equality for all."²² Here, citizenship is not understood as an individual's attachment to the nation, or even adherence to a complex set of affiliations (such as religious, ethnic, sexual, or

economic identity). Rather, it is premised on adhering to, internalizing, and inhabiting a democratic ethic.

For agonists, inhabiting the principles of freedom and equality is a collective experience. That is, political passion is a collective affect actualized within the political sphere. It extends past personal anger directed towards a singular person or a set of circumstances; it retains a philosophical bent, one that is on behalf of the many and directed at the social order. What becomes necessary, therefore, in an agonistic view, is that identities are viewed as collective and in a state of perpetual antagonism. To see oneself as a collective is to understand oneself as connected. This connection, however, is not equivalent or uniform. Rather, agonists acknowledge messier versions of ourselves and of power, in which we are always connected *and* always in conflict. It is indeed through the messy articulations of connection and antagonism that political identities are forged.

The particular role of education from this perspective is to reinvent education as a process of subjectification that “generates new political subjectivities and identities.”³ Education provides spaces in which students learn to express personal anger as political passion. As Ruitenberg has argued, classrooms are spaces that make possible the articulation of collective identities “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.”⁴ Channeling anger towards political motivations requires an intellectual and affective redirection from the singular to the collective. This channeling requires a shift in perception as well as conduct. Radical discussions facilitate these shifts. Backer reclaims a practice of political identity by harnessing political passion and re-establishing the principles of equality and freedom.

Finally, I would like to push back on Backer’s argument on two subtle but significant points. First, what he calls protocols for discussion I would call practices, because these, like political identity, are ongoing and unfinished. These can only be imperfect, unbalanced, and only ever somewhat articulated. The practice of radical discussion dwells within a constant set of tensions in that it frames politics as intellectual and base, ideal and real, comprehensive and

messy. As well, whereas Backer claims that “teachers should promote passionate talk in ways that transgress the boundaries of suitability,” I would counter that teachers don’t have to encourage passionate talk because students are already passionate. Resting on the tenets of radical democracy, agonists view passion and emotions as always/everywhere present. A significant facet of their critique of the liberal democratic tradition is that it quashes that which is already there and imposes a specific narrative of the realities of political life. Mouffe argues:

The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it or wishing it away. This is the typical liberal gesture, and such negation only leads to the impotence that characterizes liberal thought when confronted with the emergence of antagonisms and forms of violence that, according to theory, belong to the bygone age when reason had not yet managed to control the supposedly archaic passion.⁵

As we see, of concern for agonists is that the ideals of liberal socialism have been hijacked by hegemonic capitalist discourses that privilege reason over emotion and consensus over antagonism. Counter-hegemony is to play with, or disrupt, the order of things. In his articulation of what antagonist discussion “looks like,” Backer reasserts the primacy of forming collective identity in education spaces. Through his illustration of what radical discussions might “look like,” Backer also provides insight into what agonistic pluralism does: to assert political identities that view themselves as interconnected and inherently, unwaveringly, passionate.

1 Gert Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010).

2 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2006), 65.

3 Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education,” 152.

4 Claudia Ruitenberg, "Learning to Articulate: From Ethical Motivation to Political Demands," in *Philosophy of Education 2010*, ed. Gert Biesta (Urbana: IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2011), 377.

5 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 4.