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Sharon Todd
Stockholm Institute of Education, Sweden

Carl Anders Särström
Mälardalen University, Sweden

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ARTICLE

**Democracy, Education and Conflict:
Rethinking Respect and the Place of the Ethical**

Sharon Todd, Stockholm Institute of Education, Sweden

Carl Anders Säfström, Mälardalen University, Sweden

One of the cornerstones of a democratic education is a basic notion of respect for others who hold different points of view from ourselves. Yet, within an increasingly divergent public discourse about values, rights and equality, democratic education needs to concern itself with practices that not only encourage respect, but that can negotiate through the very troubled relations that often afflict classrooms and schools. Models of how to promote respect often centre on creating a conflict-free atmosphere through appeals to deliberation, dialogue, conversation, consensus or a combination of these. Indeed, conflict is often perceived as not simply being counter-productive to dialogue and conversation, but as being indicative of communicative breakdown itself. In this way, conflict becomes the symptom of social ills through which recourse to some form of dialogue supposedly acts as the remedy. The idea of conflict has become so antithetical to democratic education that little has been written on the inevitability and importance of some kinds of conflict for legitimizing the possibility of democracy itself.

Approaching conflict within the context of education is no easy task, as teachers know only too well. Everyday life in classrooms can reveal themselves to be virtual hotbeds of contestation, particularly when it comes to cross-cultural issues. For instance, students regularly enter into conflicts with one another that are reflective of racial, ethnic, or religious tensions in the society at large; they express values that sometimes compete with the dominant ones represented in the school; and they articulate beliefs that are not seen to be acceptable to local or national traditions. These can take a wide variety of forms: homophobic statements; expressions of the acceptance of violence against women within certain communities; assertions of values around questions of female modesty and sexuality; beliefs about family relations; and public expressions of religious faith. Such positions are not merely rationally-informed viewpoints but passionately held convictions, which is precisely what makes them so difficult to contend with. Even though these conflicts are not all of a kind, their fervent expression is seen as a risk to the very possibility for the democratic functioning of classroom life. Teachers, then, are often overwhelmed to the point of despair, for how can they rescue a sense of democracy from the harsh, passionate realities of the everyday?

Our purpose in this paper is to explore the significance of conflict for democratic possibilities in education and to propose an ethical orientation that seeks to make space for conflict as an integral part of learning democracy. We contend that the language teachers currently have available to them for “handling” conflict is inadequate to such a task. As hard as it is to deal with conflict, in our view, some responses to it can actually exacerbate what they intend to resolve. One such tendency has been to respond to conflict on moral terms; here viewpoints are judged as being the “right” or “wrong” ones to hold within a democratic society. Teachers then dismiss such statements outright, ignore them altogether, or try to diminish their impact through rational appeal to argument and consensus building. These responses build upon a normative assumption of democracy, as we explore below, one that can lead to forgetting that democracy itself is not simply a “moral” good, but is an on-going political process of conflictual – and passionate – struggle. Hence dealing with conflict in classrooms requires an ethical and political language which furthers not only the hope for democracy but makes it possible to articulate particular conflicts as central to the process of democratization. The question that we raise here is not how we do away with conflict, but how do we actually *face* it in ways that further the democratic project?

By way of response, the paper puts forth two ideas: a) that certain relations of conflict, particularly those identified by Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2005) as “agonistic relations,” are necessary for the very existence of democratic politics and can serve as starting points for reconsidering how teachers situate themselves in relation to cross-cultural dilemmas; and b) that an ethical orientation to conflict requires a reworking of the notion of hospitality, one that takes into account the very limitations of what education can do toward realizing its democratic goals. Before discussing these ideas in any detail, we turn to a critical exploration of the deliberative democratic framework that has framed much current theorizing in education.

Deliberative Democracy and its Limits for Education

A trend in educational thinking lately has been to place emphasis on a conception of deliberative democracy inspired by Jürgen Habermas. This view of democracy seems to have a lot to offer education in that it is based on formalized and rationally motivated communication that seeks to resolve conflict through promoting shared understanding. In Habermas’s view, participants in dialogue come together to present their arguments, or truth claims, in such a way that the justifications for the claim are subject to scrutiny. “A justified truth claim should allow its proponent to defend it with reasons against the objections of possible opponents; in the end she should be able to gain the rationally motivated agreement of the interpretation community as a whole” (Habermas, 1996, p. 14). This deliberative model, moreover, attempts to deal with the pluralism of diverse opinions in order to establish the consensus necessary for coordinated action. That is, it is not only that participants need to scrutinize their discourse, but they also must come to some collective decision about how to act in the world. As Habermas puts it, the assumption underlying this view of democracy is that participants “are ready to take on the obligations resulting from consensus and relevant for further interaction” (Habermas, p. 4). What Habermas’s theory promotes is a normative framework based on respect for the rules of communicative engagement. Deliberative democracy in this light is seen to offer possibilities for overcoming those conflicts that can detract from consensus building and decision-making.

In a time of increasing fragmentation of the perspectives on offer in the classroom, this model at first appears to propose a productive way of dealing with the diversity of worldviews. As promising as this can sound, however, there are still some serious flaws with such hope of a common, normative standard of communication for all. Not the least of which is that the rational deliberative framework seems to imply the impossibility of real disagreement in its promotion of consensus as a goal of liberal democracy. The underlying assumption in importing deliberative democracy into education is that children can be turned into democratic citizens insofar as they accept the normative rules of deliberative democratic communication. We see this as being problematic in at least two ways. First, it fails to engage rationality itself as a contested concept; and secondly, that it tends to narrow the scope of democracy to include only those who are willing (or able) to adjust to the stipulated understanding of rationality on offer here.

With respect to our first claim, the normative rules of rational dialogue set up by deliberative democracy are themselves representative of the particular ways in which the human subject has been historically constructed since the Enlightenment. They represent, in other words, how people through history have tried to make sense of who they are, and it is important to see that they are historical constructions that do not reveal a single truth of what it means to be human (Biesta, 2006; Todd, forthcoming). A rigid view of the rational subject excludes, for example, those who understand themselves in religious (or other metaphysical) terms, where rationality is not a defining aspect of their values in the first place. That is, there may be no way of providing rational justification for a truth claim (in the Habermasian sense) if that claim is grounded, for instance, in faith, as opposed to reason.

In addition, what becomes particularly problematic with a concept of rational communication in the name of deliberative democracy is that if it claims to be an appropriate response to questions of disagreement, then it risks reducing the political itself to a form of procedural democracy where disagreement all but disappears (a point we take up in detail below).

Our second point is that in claiming that rational forms of argumentation are needed for consensus (and indeed that the whole point of argumentation, as Habermas sees it, necessarily requires consensus for action), it further risks creating a situation in which the articulation of a point of view that does not “fit” or “accept” the normative standard of communication can be dismissed under the sign of “private interests” at best, or “irrationality” at worst. Thus, in principle, everything diverse and unique risks being contained within the same normative frame of reference: Differences between us become less important than the goal to create a unified “we” that is already enclosed and defined by the discursive rules of liberal democracy itself. As suffocating as this unconditional “we” can be for any conviction that is constitutive of a particular identity, it also has a tendency to embody, in our view, a certain arrogance, for it assumes that in accepting the normative, discursive rules of liberal democracy one is, by necessity, seeking to rise above the very differences – the very complex dimensions of human pluralism – that play such a central role in any democratic project (Säfström and Biesta, 2001). Dissent, therefore, is seen as something to be surmounted since it cannot be tolerated fully within the rules of rational communication. In this light, respect becomes conditional upon adherence to a normative framework, and therefore curiously detached from concrete others who hold different – and competing – points of view.

With regard to education, deliberation becomes a practice for “overcoming” dissent, a practice that is built on understanding students themselves in terms of a pre-defined identity; that is, the student who best embodies the possibilities for democratic citizenship is one whose identity is normalized through rational forms of communication. On this view, education would then become the mere vehicle through which children are socialized into particular ways of being – namely rational subjects. As a consequence, teaching risks becoming a mechanism for establishing and consolidating those identities as normal by excluding the “non-normal,” or non-rational, bases of world views (Säfström, 2005).

As stated earlier, it is not that the deliberative model has nothing to offer, at least some of the time, in terms of establishing discursive procedures for taking certain decisions. But as a model for actually engaging and confronting competing “truth claims”, values, and perspectives, it fails to sustain the diversity upon which democracy itself rests. The set of problems discussed above all seem to follow from the incapacity of the deliberative view to acknowledge that world views may not be temporary or fleeting, but are, rather, expressions of pluralism as an ontological condition of our world. As Mouffe puts it, the central question for democratic politics is not about “how to negotiate a compromise among competing interests, nor is it how to reach a ‘rational,’ i.e., fully inclusive, consensus, without any exclusion” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 14.). Instead, what Mouffe suggests is a way of orienting ourselves to conflict that makes disagreement central for democratic possibility.

In order to move beyond the deliberative trend in theoretical discourse on democracy and education, we will embark upon a framework that will allow for conflict between alternative and passionately held world views. This, we argue, allows us to see the task of the institutions of democracy (education being one of them) as being able to secure the diversity of truths as a condition for democratization.^[1] Along with Chantal Mouffe, we propose that in order for democratization to happen in any context it is necessary to take “pluralism seriously instead of trying to impose one single model on the whole world” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 115).

Conflict as Necessary for Democratization

Chantal Mouffe (2005) uses the conservative political philosopher Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy and particularly its non-political drive for establishing consensus as a condition for political action.^[2] With Schmitt, Mouffe (2005) argues that every consensus always means an end to pluralism and that every consistent rationalism "requires negating the irreducibility of antagonism" (p. 12). To negate the possibility of a conflict that cannot be solved also negates the political itself, and this is because it gets its impetus from a wide variety of human endeavours: "[E]very religious, moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis transforms itself into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy" (Schmitt quoted in Mouffe, 2005, p.).

Such antagonistic conflicts are necessary for democracy, according to Mouffe; they give meaning to democratic politics. That is, in order for democracy to be democratic, we need to begin with antagonism, where a variety of different truths can make their appearance. It is in this respect that Schmitt's model is helpful, according to Mouffe, in that the irreducible distinction between friend/enemy generates political identities of a collective kind, through the antagonism between them. A goal as well as a task for democratic politics is, therefore, to transform antagonistic conflicts into what Mouffe calls agonistic ones. The latter means to convert conflicts that are threatening to dissolve the basis for political association into conflicts in which the legitimacy of the other's position is acknowledged. To acknowledge and respect the other's right to be a legitimate opponent not only makes it possible to channel the conflict *politically* but also is itself a pre-requisite for such channeling. This means that democratic institutions are democratic to the degree they are able to promote legitimate opposition through political means.

However, for Mouffe, antagonisms between political opponents must be taken in their most serious way; that is, they are disagreements based in different hegemonies, different social orders. Therefore opponents in conflict cannot be viewed as "competitors whose interests can be dealt with through mere negotiation, or reconciled through deliberation, because in that case the antagonistic element would simply have been eliminated" (2005, p. 20). It is simply not possible, in Mouffe's view, to separate antagonisms from human behaviour. According to Mouffe, the political is ontologically based. In order to reach this point, Mouffe qualifies Schmitt's idea that the establishment of collective political identities follows from the irreducible distinction between friend/enemy by using Derrida's concept of "*différance*" and the conception of the constitutive outside – that is, that every established identity "implies the establishment of a difference," of an exteriority (Mouffe, 2005, p. 15). The constitutive outside means in this context that the identity of an established "we" gets its precise definition from the "they" from which it distinguishes itself. In this respect a "we" and a "they" are always interconnected and mutually dependent on each other at the same time as this relationship requires a genuine difference.

The challenge for democratic politics is to see that this differential relation of we/they is drawn in such a way so that it stays within the legitimacy of agonisms and not degenerate into antagonistic violence that would destroy the political assembly itself. Such violent conflicts emerge if the adversaries are not recognised as such, and respected as unique and legitimate opponents, according to Mouffe. Democratisation informed by the political is, for Mouffe, about legitimate conflicts rather than rational consensus and requires "distinguishing between the categories of 'antagonism' (relations between enemies) and 'agonism' (relations between adversaries) and envisaging a sort of 'conflictual consensus' providing a common symbolic space among opponents who are considered as 'legitimate enemies'" (2005, p. 52).

It is therefore highly problematic, according to Mouffe, when the left and right opposition is dismissed by post-political liberal thinking, since "we are still faced with political friend/enemy discriminations but they are now expressed using the vocabulary of morality" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 75). Hence opponents are cast in terms of evil instead of in political terms that legitimate their adversarial position. This is

particularly troublesome, since the type of moralizing discourse that has followed from the declaration of the post-political era (and here she refers in particular to Beck and Giddens) cannot deal with conflict in any antagonistic sense. Moralizing categories, such as good and evil, reduce the opponent who would be a “legitimate adversary” in a well-functioning democracy to an “evil enemy.” Thus the opponent who bases her conviction on hegemonic order other than the one that is currently in play becomes, in this post-political discourse, both an absolute enemy whose legitimacy as adversary is dismissed and an evil threat to the goodness of humanity itself. The moralizing political discourse dehumanizes its opponents and in so doing carries the seeds of violent reaction against that dehumanization. Such violence, in its turn, threatens to destroy democratic institutions worldwide; that is, institutions are put in the position of not being able to guarantee the possibility of transforming antagonistic political conflicts into agonistic ones.

We can see here that for education, it becomes crucial to ask how those conflicts arising out of different world views, and which often lead to violence, bullying, and ostracization, can be confronted. How can we imagine respect emerging out of the minefield of contestation over values, beliefs, opinions and truth claims? How might we think about the necessary *transformation* from antagonism into agonism as part of a specifically democratic educational project?

Toward an Ethics of Transformation?

What constitutes this movement from antagonism to agonism is something about which Mouffe is not particularly loquacious; however, following up on her ideas of the centrality of difference to the political, what we wish to propose here is that the movement from one to the other requires rethinking the relationship of ethics to politics itself. And this for two reasons: First, if part of the deliberative democratic solution to “overcoming” or “resolving” conflict in the antagonistic sense lies in a notion of Kantian respect (respect, in this case, for the rational subject), can such respect itself really be sufficient for the *transformation* of antagonistic conflict into an agonistic form? Secondly, although Mouffe is rightfully concerned with not subsuming the political into waffling ideas of the “good,” the “right,” and the “moral,” her ideas on democracy nevertheless, in our view, suggest that if there is anything we might call the ethical between human subjects emerges precisely in this transformation of violent conflict into legitimate agonism.

Beyond Kantian Respect

To take up our first point, in a chapter entitled “The Ethics of Democracy,” Mouffe (2000) herself points to the necessity of establishing different relations between ethics and politics – relations which refuse to turn the political imperative of power, hegemony, and conflict into a moral or ethical discourse of sameness – a charge which she levies against deliberative democrats as well as the post-political Third Way protagonists. Yet she also takes issue with what she refers to as the “postmodern” ethical discourse of otherness, for whilst proponents of this view acknowledge the centrality of difference, Mouffe considers them unable “to come to terms with ‘the political’ in its antagonistic dimension” (Mouffe 2000, p. 129). That is, in her eyes, even the attention to alterity—the state or quality of being other-- can occlude the central moment of decision which enacts an element of force and violence that can never be eliminated from the field of the social (2000, p. 130). Responsibility for the other cannot assure the transition from antagonism to agonism. Ethics, insofar as it is conceived as a solution, a resolution, or an answer to conflict – even when it does so through the “recognition” of otherness – ultimately fails to acknowledge that the violence of human association does not disappear in turn. “This is to imagine that there could be a point where ethics and politics perfectly coincide, and this is precisely what I am denying because it means erasing the violence that is inherent in sociability” (2000, pp. 134-5). So, the ethical cannot provide the political with its normative dimension, nor act as

its complement. In short, it cannot ground politics, as if the political somehow grew organically from the seeds of the ethical relation to the other. Instead, Mouffe rightly, to our minds, calls for a “problematization of the notion of human sociability which underlies democratic thinking” as the basis for reframing the relation between ethics and politics (2000, p. 130). In short, it requires seeing human sociability in all its abrasiveness and madness and not through a sublime possibility embodying the virtues of the good and the rational. Thus there is nothing about the ethical that can tell us how to judge, how to calculate one’s actions, how to decide, given the messy terrain of human sociability. Her move, therefore, is to recognize the necessary *hiatus* between ethics and politics, which in Simon Critchley’s (2004) terms, “opens onto a new experience of the political decision” (p. 177). That is, the distance that separates ethics and politics needs to be thought anew.

Although we agree with this move to reformulate the relation between ethics and politics as hiatus, what remains underdeveloped in Mouffe’s work is how to think the political move from antagonism to agonism as revealing simultaneously a renewed understanding of the ethical itself. That is, it is the transformation of conflict in the political sphere which suggests something about the need to invest ethics with language that moves beyond “respect for the adversary.” Although there exists a common bond between parties in conflict in the agonistic model (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20), how is the respect to be granted to the legitimate adversary any different from the Kantian model she claims to be criticizing?

Kantian respect is largely conceived on the premise of the moral law. Even though respect is directed to persons and not to things (Kant, 1997, p. 66), the basis of that respect is the extent to which persons subject themselves to the moral law as that which guides the authorship of their actions (Kant, p. 72). This means that only rational subjects are capable of receiving respect; “the subject thus respects not the other’s singular and irreplaceable personality but rather that which makes him or her similar to itself: the other’s humanity, that is, according to Kant, his or her capacity to be author of the moral law” (Chalier, 2002, p. 65). Thus what we respect is in fact a commonality with the other, who, like us, is an autonomous subject, a finite and reasonable being. If, as Mouffe argues so forcefully, the very Kantian universalism which deliberative democrats have all too often embraced through their appeals to rationality fails to account for the conflictual nature of human sociality, then how is the political defense of respecting one’s adversaries (insofar as they respect the ethico-political values of liberty and equality even while disagreeing on their content) get us any closer to what it takes to become agonistic? How might a rethinking of the ethical actually take into account the transformation she requires, without trying to erase conflict itself?

For instance, as Derrida (1997) has pointed out, it is only along with responsibility that respect marks the political virtue of friendship – a cornerstone of democratic thinking. On the one hand, friendship is reliant upon the separation and distance one has to another that only respect – unlike love – can give, while it is also caught up in the reciprocity and equality between subjects. Yet, on the other hand, respect is also coupled with responsibility for the singular other. This responsibility comes prior to reason, the reason which “makes the Idea of equality an obligation” (Derrida, 1997, p. 276). In a deconstructive reading, Derrida unpacks the structure of democratic friendship as embodying both a non-reasonable responsibility and an eminently reasonable respect. Thus in wishing to disentangle democracy from rationality, since it fails to adequately account for dissent, Mouffe needs also to shift her seemingly ethical presumption of respect from a similarly rational bias. This is not to suggest that reason plays no role in the movement from antagonism to agonism, but neither can a language of respect without passion, without sensibility prior to reason, fully take into account the transformation between subjects that this move requires. Indeed, if democracy is going to be conceived as a never-ending process of transforming conflict without ever doing away with it, then how might we think this transition beyond conventional notions of respect? And how might this reform education’s relation to democracy?

Conditional Hospitality and Ethical Interruption

This brings us to our second point. Above we proposed that if the ethical is capable of emerging between people in concrete times and places, it would seem to have something to do with the moment the transformation of conflict from antagonism to agonism occurs. Not that the ethical and political coincide; rather it is, we want to suggest, the interruptive trace of the ethical which can be found in these moments of transformation.

The ethical, for both Derrida and Levinas, is rooted in an unlimited responsibility to the other that finds its best expression in the figure of hospitality. With respect to responsibility specifically, Levinas (1969) locates its emergence in the response the singular “I” gives in *receiving* the other in all her alterity. Such a dual movement between giving and receiving is the place and time of hospitality – a welcoming of the other that is at once a gift and a reception of generosity (see Todd, 2007). Respect, on this account, is not about treating the other as another rational subject like myself, but about *responding* to her specificity in a way that secures her right to be other. That is, as hospitality embraces the other as other, she is welcomed without limits and without conditions. Indeed, the hospitable relation would appear to be the ethical relation par excellence: an inexhaustible responsibility to the other opens up in the time of this hospitality.

When discussing responsibility in this way, Levinas is all too aware of how this ethical dyadic relation cannot simply be ferried across to the shores of politics. Politics by its very nature cannot be about a relation between a singular “I” and the “other” alone. But as Levinas maintains, it is nonetheless this responsibility for the other which informs our political life; that institutions and states, if they are to be just, ought to begin from the position of what one might call a “hospitable respect,” not from a position of granting respect to a rational subject (Levinas, 2001, p. 167). “The one respected is not the one to whom, but the one with whom one renders justice” (Levinas, 1987, p. 43). Beginning with hospitality does not mean, for Levinas, that we merely “institutionalize” responsibility for the other (which simply is not possible), but instead marks the extent to which institutions can allow for hospitable respect to emerge – however momentary and fleeting such occurrences might be. Although the field of political conflict cannot be reduced to the ethical relation, ethical respect for the other can act as an interruptive moment to the otherwise rational decision-making, planning, and prioritizing that goes on in the name of democratic politics. This unconditional hospitality cannot be guaranteed by legislation or the state (Derrida, 2003, p. 129); it merely “happens,” erupting into the field of political experience.

In his discussion of tolerance, Derrida makes an important move that gives us yet another way of thinking about the relation between hospitality and democracy. In making a crucial distinction between *unconditional* and *conditional* hospitality, Derrida looks to how hospitality functions in the sphere of politics. He illustrates the conditional aspects of hospitality as that which we in fact live with day-to-day; for example, tolerance is a “conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality” (Derrida, 2003, p. 128). Moreover, he details how, unlike unconditional hospitality, conditional hospitality is necessarily parsimonious. It enacts instead a gesture of welcome to those who are invited into my home – with definite strings attached: “I invite you, I welcome you into *my home*, on the condition that you adapt to the laws and norms of my territory, according to my language, tradition, memory, and so on” (2003, p. 128). In this view, at the level of politics, the welcoming of the other is contained within certain parameters of acceptability. It is as if a certain hegemony watches over our invitation.

We want to suggest here that, on the one hand, all politics occurs at the level of conditional hospitality: At stake is the question of power and control, and it is always at risk of turning itself into something terribly non-hospitable. Yet, on the other hand, democratic politics, if we follow Levinas’s and Derrida’s logic, also embodies within it a possibility for ethical disruption. Although Mouffe is critical

of an ethics of alterity on the grounds that it cannot deal with the violence of social relations (see above), conceived in terms of “interruption,” such an ethics, in our view, lies at the heart of the transformational moment through which antagonism becomes agonism. It is not merely a Kantian respect that is on offer here, but a hospitality in which respect for the other as other has the potential to emerge and transform our existing relations of hostility. Thus while ethics does not ground politics, it nonetheless remains an anarchic presence that announces itself only through this surprising moment of transformation. This possibility of surprise suggests that democracy is founded on a memory of ethics, where the passage from antagonism to agonism, from raw conflict to the political formulation of legitimate conflict, is one in which pure (or unconditional) hospitality does not fully disappear, but must nevertheless remain unnamed. Such an ethics of democracy cannot sediment into appeals for a normative discourse ethics or rules of communicative engagement; instead, it emerges, is *revealed*, in the actual encounter between people holding different points of view. Although conditional hospitality is provisional, it nonetheless contains this trace of interruption upon which the *promise* of democratization rests. In our view, without this notion of interruption, the transformative moment from antagonism to agonism risks becoming the “result” of yet another procedural norm instead of becoming a truly disruptive political moment.

In this sense, the move from antagonism to agonism demands that we think conflict anew: neither as something to be feared nor controlled, and not even as something to be overcome, but as something that needs to be transformed into a relation that keeps open the possibility of further dissent. Because decisions are born out of indeterminacy and conflict, democracy is, therefore, not a “nice” relation, nor is it even a fixed form of political organization, but in Critchley’s (2004) words, “a *deformation* of society from itself... as the movement of democratisation” (p.183). And the place of the ethical is not, therefore, about a normative imperative of what we should do in order to reach consensus, but about how we live with the “endless betterment” of the state (Critchley 2004, p. 183) through the possibility of upheaval and disturbance that the ethical relation to the other brings.

Education for a Democratic Promise

Rather than focusing on promoting consensus through dialogue in schools, what we have explored here suggests that education needs to be infused with a new ethical and political language for taking conflict seriously. One such move, for us, is a shift from the idea of “handling” conflict to an idea of “facing” it. For what is at stake in teachers’ encounters with passionately held views is how to teach students to channel these politically in ways that promote on-going democratic struggle. We do not mean to suggest here that schools can embody democratic relations all, or even most, of the time. (This would seem impossible, given the structures of authority, the inequality embedded in the adult-child relation, and the limited freedoms which frame school life). Yet, insofar as education can be part of on-going processes of democratization, we do think that they can play an important role in re-orienting youth to expressions of conflict.

One of the tasks we see for education involves the turning of antagonisms into agonisms, of providing a space and time for students to express views that create not only a culture of pluralism, but that tie these views to larger political articulations. In this way, schools do not simply “prepare” youth to become “democratic citizens” (as if this were a single identity for one and all), but they can introduce them to the political aspects of existing in plural states, which means facing disagreement on political instead of moral terms. For instance, expressions of diverse values in the classroom need to be examined in relation to the on-going political climate, social fears, and available identifications in order to provide students with symbolic alternatives, with new forms of political identification, and new languages that legitimate others’ points of view. At the same time, this work needs to be conducted in an atmosphere where what consistently remains on the table is the extent to which such

views can become part of a viable and robust democratic project. This is not an “everything goes” approach to all the views on offer in the classroom. It is merely to insist that the pedagogical task in promoting democratic education is about turning expressions of antagonism into agonistic forms that can be dealt with as part of meaningful political engagement. For if youth do not learn to experiment with creating arenas where conflicts can find legitimation without violence, then the future of democracy itself is surely at risk.

What we are advocating for here is the need to consider conflict in terms of political disagreement so that students’ views are conceived on the register of we/they instead of on the register of good and evil. The point is not to abolish the we/they distinctions, which are continually being made and remade in the classroom, but to help students recognize how these distinctions are drawn and how each of them needs to live responsively with the exclusions they create. In creating communities of “we” around certain issues, students need also to recognize those who are simultaneously being instantiated as “they.” Instead of telling students that the work of democracy is to create one “we” through consensus building, the point rather is to come to an acknowledgement of their implication in creating – and sustaining – exclusionary forms of belonging in holding certain points of view collectively.

Such a process is best offered, as we have said, through a conditional hospitality. On the one hand, such hospitality has obvious “strings attached”; that is, not all views will or can be entertained equally if they are expressed as direct threats to the on-going project of working for democracy itself. Hence, offering conditional hospitality provides the limit situation in which students’ views can seek and find legitimation. And, in this sense, what matters is not whether others are respected as rational moral agents themselves, but how we might take responsibility for creating the best possible limit situations through which passionate perspectives find legitimate outlets. On the other hand, this conditional hospitality also brings into the discussion the ethical dimension of democratization. It is not that one can teach or impart to students an unconditional respect for the other; rather it is a question of attentiveness to the ethical possibility that emerges in the transformative movement from antagonism to agonism. What this means for teachers is becoming attentive to the moments in which responsibility for the other breaks through classroom convention; for it is here, we argue, that the other’s point of view is accepted as different and legitimate. In other words, it is at this point of disjuncture, where hospitality appears, however fleetingly, as a trace of the ethical in the specific relationships between students. To reiterate, we are not advocating that teachers can instruct students directly to be responsible (as an openness to the other), but that they attend to those moments where students respond to another’s passionate position with generosity and welcome – even when, and perhaps especially when, they disagree with this very position.

Thus what becomes crucial to attune ourselves to as teachers is the creation of a common symbolic space in order to cultivate what Mouffe refers to as “conflictual consensus.” For the commonality here is not one founded on respect for the rational subject, nor is it found in our agreement with one another, but on the necessity of living with the tensions that are inherent to our pluralistic world. The creation of such a space requires a willingness to face conflict, to channel that conflict into political forms amenable to the furthering of democracy, and to attend to those moments of ethical disruption that reveal themselves as an openness to the other. If disagreement, dissent, and conflict are necessary to democracy, then the challenge for educators is to offer those hospitable conditions – no matter how conditional – whereby students can learn that holding a view passionately does not disqualify them from participating meaningfully in democratic forms of life.

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Notes

¹ We use the term “democratization” in order to highlight the idea that democracy involves a continual process of transformation.

[\[2\]](#) Mouffe’s agenda, though, is different from Schmitt’s; the latter refuted liberal democracy altogether, while Mouffe rather strives to make democracy more “democratic.”