Toward a Democracy of the Emotions

Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson

Introduction

Political theories often begin (or tacitly assume) an account of the problem to which they are intended to provide a solution. Today this problem is often framed in terms of the degree of difference, diversity or pluralism to be found in contemporary societies. The forces of enmity aroused by such diversity threaten to create situations in which some groups oppress, attack and marginalize others, and to lead to conflicts justified by reference to ideas of ethnicity, nationality or race. How, then, can contemporary political regimes avoid these dangers? To put matters in terms of top-down state-centered criteria, the aim is to secure a polity’s legitimacy and stability in a world of reasonable (and unreasonable) pluralism. Given that the citizens of the contemporary nation-state differ widely in their values, how can this state be organized in such a way that it secures their general support and so underpins its continuing stability? To put things in terms of bottom-up civil society-centered criteria, the task is for people to learn to take fair decisions for themselves despite their differences, or to learn to use their differences as a way of creating a better world together. How can citizens treat their differences as a resource as they seek to join with one another in a union that does not silence any of their distinct voices? What kind of political processes, if any, could facilitate this?

A number of political theorists have recently proposed deliberative democracy as a solution to this problem. For our purposes, this aspect of the political system can be defined as a series of interlinked public spaces in which all citizens can participate in an ongoing free and fair debate leading to reasonable agreement – or even rational consensus – on matters of public concern. The key idea is that, if all citizens have the opportunity to come together in public forums in order to engage in structured discussion under certain specified conditions, the results will be political outputs to which they will all freely consent. Although citizens may not agree with all the specific details of every political output of this system, they will support them since they have emerged from a deliberative process in which they have played a full and active part. For Seyla Benhabib, for example, the “legitimacy and rationality” of a political system results from “the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of public concern.”1 Such deliberative processes can assume a variety of forms. At the local level, for instance, these could include the various means by which public agencies responsible for health, housing, and education seek to involve local citizens in decision-making regarding the planning and delivery of services. Local citizens may also
be engaged in deliberative democracy when running a local voluntary association, housing or employment cooperative, or when involved in decision-making in a local trade union or social movement organization.

However accounts of deliberative democracy, like most mainstream political theory, lack an account of affectivity, particularly an account of group affectivity. To simplify somewhat, either the emotions are ignored or, if they are mentioned, it is only as dangerously destabilizing forces that need to be kept in check. For this reason deliberative democrats intentionally abstract away from the emotions in order to specify the conditions (including certain specified deliberative rules and virtues) in which reasonable deliberation can lead to a rational agreement. Thus they characterize public spaces above all as places of calm deliberation, places in which reasoned argument predominates over irrational emotion. But it is clear that this characterization of deliberation is at some distance from our everyday experience of the rough and tumble of political debate. To put our point at its strongest, we believe that this sort of political theory is too abstract and rationalistic to be of practical use. It is futile to devise rules for reasonable people if people are often not reasonable as defined. In the world as we know it, rather than in the world as we would like it to be, public spaces of deliberation are places permeated by emotional forces. In practice, emotions such as fear, hatred, and cruelty, as well as compassion, remorse, and grief, often undermine commitment to impartial principles of deliberation in such public forums.

At the same time, and much more positively, the emotions can underpin such a commitment. Our capacities to communicate, listen, understand, and learn are affective as much as cognitive capacities. As a consequence, we argue, it is necessary for a model of deliberative democracy to have an account of the emotions in order for it to be able to take the emotions into account. We intend to make a start on this task by developing an account of what, following Anthony Giddens, we call a “democracy of the emotions.” This is the idea of a democratic society in which public spaces for deliberation are structured in such a way that individuals do not have to leave their emotions behind in order to enter these spaces as democratic citizens. In these deliberative spaces, citizens can reveal their needs and express their emotions in a process of coming to what might be thought of as a “good enough” understanding of their fellows. Our belief is that, since such a political system could contain the highly charged emotional states that characterize individuals and groups in contemporary, highly diverse societies, it would be of greater practical import and moral legitimacy than other models of democracy on offer today.

The Feminist Critique of Deliberative Democracy

In order to begin to develop our thesis, we now sketch two charges that feminist critics make against deliberative democracy, charges which are of particular interest from our point of view.
Misunderstanding the Other

The first criticism made of deliberative democracy is that it has an inadequate and indeed harmful account of how citizens go about understanding their fellows in the public spaces of deliberation. This criticism focuses on its requirement that these deliberators take up a standpoint of impartiality – what Benhabib calls the viewpoint of the generalized other – when judging competing public reasons (or claims of justice) and private reasons (or subjective needs). For Jürgen Habermas, for example, “(g)iven the communicative presuppositions of an inclusive and non-coercive discourse among free and equal partners, the principle of universalization requires each participant to project himself into the perspective of all.”³ To do this, it is argued, involves achieving some form of reciprocity, defined by Habermas as a successful reversing of perspectives. That is, in order to understand the other, the subject must come to see how things look from the other’s viewpoint. Feminist critics attack this demand for impartiality and symmetrical reciprocity. They contend that it leads the deliberators to overlook pertinent distinctions between individuals. The viewpoint of the generalized other is in fact not impartial: it is guilty of a false universalism that undermines difference. For example, when we speak from such a viewpoint about humanity or the common good, we are likely in fact to be referring to a sub-set of humanity, such as men.

In place of such an approach to understanding others, some of these feminist critics propose that, when judging competing claims of justice, deliberators should seek instead to take up the standpoint of all particular others. Thus, for Simone Chambers, impartiality is achieved “by becoming more attached to the concrete interests of particular people. That is, it is not a view from nowhere but rather a view from the perspective of each other person.”⁴ To take up this latter standpoint, individuals must have the ability to empathize with each particular other – that is, they must be able to understand how it feels to be in that other’s position. In this way, such critics conclude, it is possible to be sensitive to difference.

There are, however, yet other critics who believe that the act of understanding – whether of particular or generalized others – can be intrusive and oppressive in itself. Iris Marion Young argues that any attempt to achieve reciprocity – to understand the other by looking at the world from their perspective – threatens to undermine the difference between subject and other. She contends that the idea of reciprocity as reversibility presents a direct threat to difference.⁵ In particular, the subject’s attempt at reversibility with the other is likely to result in an assimilation of the other, a failure to respect its difference. In a case of what Young calls “falsifying projection,” the subject unwittingly carries its own beliefs and values into what it (wrongly) believes to be the other’s perspective.⁶ In this way, for example, a black person may experience themselves being nudged subtly towards assuming the position of the victim as a consequence of the well-meaning solidarity of the white. Hence Young proposes that the subject approaches the other...
based on a practice of understanding that she calls “asymmetrical reciprocity.” Following such a practice, the subject accepts the asymmetry of condition between itself and the other and consequently seeks to achieve a relationship of reciprocity with the other without trying to put itself in the other’s shoes. In this way, Young believes, such an approach will help to preserve difference. Later on we argue that Young fails to provide a convincing account of how such a practice of understanding could work, and we offer an alternative model in its place.

The Voice of Reason

A second charge made by feminist critics against accounts of deliberative democracy is that they privilege a particular form of communication which is, in itself, exclusionary. In thinking about the nature of communication, a significant number of deliberative democrats draw to varying extents on Habermas’s theory of communicative action. He offers an account of what he believes are the unavoidable preconditions of communication, and suggests that one of these conditions is the ever present possibility of discourse in which validity claims can be challenged and redeemed. In this account, he makes a strong distinction between the rational and affective aspects of human interaction. Thus he suggests that, in discourse, the only force operative is “the force of the better argument,” and the only motivation that actors should have is that of reaching agreement; as he says, “discourse takes place under conditions that neutralize all motives except that of cooperatively seeking truth.” Young points out that this is a highly rationalistic account of communication. She comments: “Habermas implicitly reproduces an opposition between reason and desire and feeling in his conception of communication . . . because he devalues and ignores the expressive and bodily aspects of communication.”

Other accounts of deliberative democracy, while owing little or no debt to Habermas, are nevertheless still based on a conception of deliberation which contrasts reason and emotion. Consider one not unrepresentative example. Jon Elster draws a fundamental contrast between arguing and other forms of communication and social interaction. He suggests that arguing is intrinsically connected to rationality and reason; its content is impartial, disinterested, and dispassionate; its style is calm, cool, and undisturbed. The other mode of collective decision making that involves communication is bargaining. But Elster links this to forms of communication that are very different to deliberation. Here he lists rhetoric, oratory, sophistry, and demagogy. Such communication is biased, prejudiced, and partial in content; it is passionate, emotional, and turbulent in style. On the basis of this contrast, Elster argues – or rather assumes – that deliberation must be restricted to reasonable argument, and must exclude all other forms of affectively charged communication.

Young and other critics argue the very notion of deliberation on which the model of deliberative democracy is founded inflicts damage to difference. She
argues that “by restricting their conception of democratic discussion narrowly to critical argument, most theorists of deliberative democracy assume a culturally biased conception of discussion that tends to silence or devalue some people or groups.” Such a conception, she believes, privileges the sort of agonistic, general, dispassionate, and disembodied speech often associated with white, middle-class men (and academics, we should add). This effectively silences or devalues cooperative, particular, affective, and embodied forms of speech (e.g., the sharing of experience, the telling of stories, impassioned outbursts) which are most associated with socially marginalized groups such as sexual and ethnic minorities for whom “coming to voice” remains an ongoing struggle. Of particular concern to us here, this notion of deliberation privileges speech that is “dispassionate and disembodied,” opposing “mind and body, reason and emotion,” falsely identifying “objectivity with calm and absence of emotional expression.”

The inference that Young draws from her argument is that, in the interests of political equality, a broader idea of communication must include “greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling.” Greeting involves the informal phrases and bodily gestures (handshakes, etc.) that create an atmosphere for relaxed and open communication by establishing “trust” and “respect.” Rhetoric comprises of those linguistic flourishes with which speakers give words wings. As Young says, there is “an important erotic dimension to communication that aims to reach understanding . . . persuasion is partly seduction.” Storytelling involves relating narratives that foster “understanding across . . . difference without making those who are different symmetrical” by providing accounts of the values, experiences, and knowledge of particular individuals and groups. She contends that, by judging all acts by which speakers aim to reach understanding (including those imbued with emotions) equal in significance, such an expanded idea of communication would be much more egalitarian. Combining this with other modifications to deliberative democracy gives Young a model that she calls “communicative democracy.” In such a system, “all citizens or their representatives must have the equal opportunity to make proposals and give reasons for them, and to criticize others.” Furthermore, “[p]articipants in a process of communicative democracy . . . must be able to express their needs, interests, and opinions in their own way, and not be dismissed because they lack expertise or ‘proper’ speaking style.”

Young’s ideas have immediate practical relevance to developments in deliberative democracy in the UK. For example, the way in which people with disabilities and psychiatric survivors have demanded the development of forums in which they can give an account of their experiences is based on an implicit idea of storytelling. The idea is that such forums should enable these groups to tell and retell their stories in their own voice to those who have been immune from such experiences. A conception of greeting is implicit in the practice of what in the UK has become known as the DIY (“do-it-yourself”) movement of grass roots
activists. Wayne Clarke, for example, provides a detailed account of the way in which Exodus, one of the most celebrated DIY initiatives born out of rave culture, takes great pains to create an informal, welcoming atmosphere in all of their collective meetings. Later on we build on Young’s ideas here, and in particular we show why certain affective conditions must be in place if these ideas are to be effective.

A Psychoanalytical Perspective on the Emotions

We began with the suggestion that deliberative democracy stands in need of an account of group affectivity so that it can be transformed into a democracy of the emotions. We have started to develop this thesis by sketching a critique of deliberative democracy which suggests that it fails to provide a convincing account of how deliberators can understand each other without undermining their differences, and it is based on an exclusionary conception of communication. So how can ‘the other’ best be understood? And how can a wider range of types of communication be allowed into deliberative forums? In order to answer these questions, we shall draw on a current of psychoanalytical thought that is of mainly British provenance. In what follows we use the ideas of Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion to offer a perspective that could develop our thinking about deliberative practices in such a way that reason and passion are brought together rather than split apart.

From Klein’s perspective, developed later by Bion in his theory of thinking, affective states of an essentially psychosomatic form – such as gut reactions, sensations, and perturbations – precede developmentally the existence of an apparatus for containing and thinking about them. To put it another way, emotional experience always outstrips and transcends the human capacity to assimilate and digest it. In his reflections on the Kleinian contribution, Bob Hinshelwood notes the central

ity of the concept of projective identification. While in the hands of a Kleinian such as Herbert Rosenfeld, projective identification refers to the more violent process by which self forces other to contain what is unbearable to self, Bion saw projective identification as a fundamental, pre-symbolic way of making emotional contact with the other – the only method available to the infant in its earliest stages of development. Thus the development of this concept in Klein’s work is central to the shift in the psychoanalytic perspective that accompanied the Kleinian development from the symbolic to the pre-symbolic realm, from childhood and the neuroses to infancy and the psychoses. This perspective has found expression in radical developments in psychoanalytical technique involving the use of the transference and counter-transference. Their deployment in the analytic situation amounts to the recognition both that the primary mode of communication of the patient is an affective one and that the fundamental way in which the analyst receives and understands this communication is by being in touch with her/his own feeling state. While what the patient says continues to be important, the key to understanding lies in the question:
“what does it feel like to be with this patient at this moment in time, in the here-and-now?” Later we use these ideas to build upon Young’s account of understanding the other in deliberation.

According to the Group Relations tradition that emerged from Bion’s work, the primary way in which the group communicates is also at an emotional level. As David Armstrong puts it, at the heart of Bion’s approach to working with groups was a “disciplined attention to the emotional experience that was present and presented.”25 Two aspects of this approach are worth emphasizing. First, Bion believes that individuals are always already located in groups. In *Experiences in Groups*, he insists that he is “viewing group phenomena that do not begin”;26 his point here is that we have never *not* been in groups. Second, as Armstrong notes, there are difficulties inherent to the idea of “emotional experience,” not the least of which is our tendency to locate it within the individual, “as if such experiences were matters of private ownership.”27 In reality, emotions themselves are rarely, if ever, located within a purely individual space: like power they are part of the medium within which all social relations occur. Groups develop their own barely conscious affective cultures, something Bion describes in terms of his theory of group “basic assumptions.” The three assumptions that he outlines – dependency, fight-flight (paranoid), and pairing (salvationist) – can be thought of as timeless survival myths operating at a primitive, pre-psychological level.28 We make use of this theory below when considering how, if the range of acceptable communication in deliberative groups is widened, it can still be possible for them to “contain” affective forces.

We shall draw upon the work of these two psychoanalytical thinkers to put forward the following two propositions. First, cognition and affect, thinking and feeling, are separate but interpenetrating dimensions of human experience. They are the constant co-presents of human experience: wherever there is experience there is cognition and there is affect, entwined together in many different forms. This will be highly relevant when considering the ways in which self understands – or fails to understand – other. Second, our status as group beings – albeit as group beings at war with our groupishness29 – means that emotions belong at least as much to the group as to the individual. If these two propositions are taken together, their pertinence for the theory of deliberative democracy will be apparent. Any group of people involved in processes of deliberation will generate an emotional dynamic. Such a dynamic is partly specific to that group but it is also influenced by the affective dimension of the group identities that people bring with them and also by what is at stake for that group in its particular situation. This dynamic will influence and be influenced by the processes of understanding, misunderstanding, reflection, persuasion, agreement, and disagreement that constitute deliberation.

**Reason, Passion, and Deliberation**

Before we consider what light a theory of the emotions could cast on feminist critiques of deliberative democracy we must first say something about the
implications of our psychoanalytical perspective for the relationship between reason and passion, cognition and affect. It was Phillip Rieff who, some twenty years ago, drew attention to the way in which Western thought betrays an irrational passion for dispassionate rationality. In the particular field with which we are concerned, we have suggested that the dominant rationalistic strand of political theory tends to construe deliberative democracy as an enclave where political reason might flourish free from the contaminating effects of manipulated passions. From this perspective, reason and passion are seen as opposites, as forces in conflict with each other. Emotion must be controlled or suppressed if reasoned dialogue is to take place. The principal point we wish to make here is that emotion is a pervasive aspect of our lives, including our political lives. The skill of the political agitator in arousing collective passions and channeling them in a particular direction has been a characteristic of political leaders for centuries. In the media-dominated politics of the twentieth century, this is an art known not just to revolutionaries, nationalists, and fascists, but also by a Thatcher, Clinton, or Bush. We want to argue that emotion also pervades the spaces of political deliberation. The idea that there could be a deliberative style of speech which is free from emotion is false. A variety of different emotions can underlie what passes for rational speech and dispassionate thought. The problem, then, is that many deliberative democrats are unaware of the affective dimension that is present in their own preferred style of discourse.

Within psychoanalysis the vexed question of the connection between reason and passion has found expression in terms of the relationship between the ego and the id. Following Joel Whitebook’s recent examination of this relationship, we note that Freud’s earlier juxtaposition of these two agencies saw their relationship, and hence that between the reality principle and the pleasure principle, as essentially conflictual. This account was superseded when, in his later investigations into the erotic foundation of reason, Freud eventually moved beyond seeing reason and passion as binary opposites. As Whitebook notes, Freud’s later theory sees Eros as containing the self-preservative instincts, phenomena that he had previously viewed as standing opposed to the sexual instincts. Eros is seen as a life force that constantly seeks to synthesize the fragments of experience leading towards a higher unity, whereas Thanatos seeks to destroy links, splitting and disconnecting. It is this later theory of the instincts that was developed by the Kleinian tradition and later by Bion in papers such as “Attacks on Linking,” where Bion develops his idea of “hatred of thinking.” In a series of influential papers in the 1960s Bion completely recasts the idea of the ego through an investigation of the intimate relation between thought and emotion. For Bion, thought is an affective and embodied phenomenon as well as a cognitive one. On the basis of his investigation of “thought disorders” in people undergoing psychotic states, he was able to examine the way in which powerful affective forces saturate all aspects of mental work from hallucinatory states at one extreme to mathematical reasoning at the other. (This in turn has provided part of the basis
for what now tends to be called the post-Kleinian development in contemporary psychoanalysis.)

Viewed from this perspective, then, the idea of a sphere of life devoted to reasoned argument and free from the disturbances of passion is an impossibility. The cool, methodical, and dispassionate voice of reason is no less full of affect than the excited and embodied voices of the excluded. It is simply a different kind of affect, one perhaps as likely to be touched by a coldness of aggression or a hubristic urge to get at the truth no matter what the cost as by a concern for the other or a solidaristic respect for a different standpoint. But it should be noted that the interpenetration of reason and passion does not necessarily hinder the operation of reason; in fact it can facilitate it just as well as it can frustrate it. Reason without passion is reason without energy or dynamism. For example, if cut off from aggression, reason lacks bite and sharpness. The constructive use of aggression underpins the capacity to cut through superfluous or misleading detail and get to the heart of an issue, the ability to get hold of an argument and critically dissect it, and the ability to hold on tenaciously to a vital truth when counter-arguments are flying all around. More generally human emotions such as hate, love, and hopefulness contribute enormously to our capacities both to understand and to be understood by the other. For example, we cannot sustain doubt and open-mindedness without a capacity to tolerate anxiety. Indeed in a later section we argue that self can only fully understand other if self is available to be disturbed affectively by the other.

Thus we would argue that reason and understanding are not just cognitive processes, they are also strongly influenced by the affects. In just the same way, unreason involves both cognitive and affective elements; it cannot be equated just with the affective. In this case the issue of affect and how it might be harnessed constructively within a communicative democracy is not just a question for those—like Young—who insist that citizens should be able to bring their emotions with them when they enter the public sphere. The emotions are never not in the public sphere; they can never be excluded from deliberative spaces. All voices, including (we were going to say “even” here before we caught ourselves) the most detached, are saturated with affect. The question then is not “should we allow affect into deliberative spaces?” but “which kinds of affects should be allowed to dominate and through what expressive forms?”

In the UK this has been the fundamental question posed by excluded groups, originally by working class communities, women, and ethnic minority groups in the 1980s, and now by people with disabilities, older people, and survivors of the psychiatric system in their struggles with the welfare state. These groups have consistently called attention to the style in which welfare governance is conducted and to the atmosphere and feeling-tone of meetings. Such questions came to be seen as inseparable from questions of power, particularly the power of professionals and bureaucrats that has found expression in the formalization and jargonization of deliberation. As a consequence the often impassioned voice of

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the local citizen or service user has been taken as a sign of unreason. As these groups have demanded to speak in their own voice, a voice that expresses the anger, pain, and despair of the excluded, the state has been forced to find new ways of creating deliberative spaces which are permeable to the experiences of these previously excluded constituencies. This task has been made more difficult because excluded groups, particularly those based upon minority ethnic status, have different ways of expressing and comprehending affect. Under conditions of globalization, Chinese, Moroccan, Kosovar, and Turk may find themselves living side by side in the suburb of a European city. Not only will a given affect such as aggression be expressed in different ways by such groups, but one group may experience another group’s reserve as an expression of coldness rather than civility.

Understanding the Other

Now we can begin to develop our response to the first criticism made of deliberative democracy, namely that it endorses an account of how citizens understand each other that threatens to undermine the differences between them. Klein provided two different ways of thinking about the act of understanding. On the one hand she saw the capacity to place oneself in the position of another to be an achievement of the depressive position. This means that it marks a major step away from the preceding (paranoid schizoid) subject position in which the separate existence of the other is not acknowledged. On the other hand Klein offered a second perspective, bound up with the idea of projective identification as a primary form of emotional communication, which makes a striking contrast to the first. Let us consider for a moment the mother/infant relationship, the original model of the relationship between “container” and “contained” (see below). Ronald Britton describes it thus:

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the mother, if she was receptive to the infant’s state of mind and capable of allowing it to be evoked in herself, could process it in such a way that in an identifiable form she could attend to it in the infant. In this way, something which in the infant was near-sensory and somatic was transformed into something more mental by the mother which could be used for thought or stored as memory.

Whereas understanding through empathy requires the imaginative projection of the self into the other – a process which, as Young suggests, can so easily become corrupted into the desire to penetrate or get inside the other – this second form of understanding, one that could be called “affective understanding,” comes about when others are able to project something of themselves into self.

Bion develops the same idea in slightly different terms. He gives the name “reverie” to that receptive state of being through which I allow the other to evoke something of themselves in me, something which at that moment they are unable
to bear. The whole idea of the use of the counter-transference in psychoanalysis is based upon the idea of the capacity of analysts to be in touch with what the other evokes in them. Indeed the paradox is that this receptive state of being is undermined by the active desire to understand the other. Thus it is that Bion attaches considerable importance to Keat’s notion on “negative capability,” the ability for a person “to remain in doubt and mystery without irritable reaching after fact or reason.” To approach this state of reverie, the analyst must seek freedom from “memory and desire,” including the desire to make the patient better.38

It follows that it is quite possible for the empathic individual also to be an impermeable individual. Indeed I may be so busy trying to put myself in the other’s position that I leave the other with the feeling that I am quite impossible to get through to. Does this mean – as Young seems to suggest – that the resort to empathic modes of understanding is inevitably imperialistic? We believe that this is not necessarily so. Christopher Bollas provides some useful clues that can lead us to a better account of how the self should approach the other. He believes that the active desire to understand the other can lead to development only if it retains a playful quality. By drawing on Winnicott’s notion of the creative potential of illusion, Bollas suggests that the inevitable elusiveness of the other means that we should think of dialogue as a benign dialectic of misunderstanding in which each partner is “secured from anxiety or despair by the illusion of understanding and yet freed by its impossibility to imagine one another.”39 Put another way, a keen awareness of one’s capacity for misunderstanding is the only sound basis for any attempt to take the position of the other. The capacity to see things from the other’s point of view is therefore illusional, but illusional in Winnicott’s sense as occupying the transitional space in which phenomena are both internal and external, true and false, projection and reality. So long as our illusions retain their fictional quality, like play-stuffs of the mind, self and other can continue to engage in “shared playing” out of which development can proceed.40 But if the claims that the self makes for its illusion of understanding are too great, then we move from play to struggle.

Thus while empathy is active and projective, Kleinian theory also highlights another mode of understanding, one which draws attention to the passive and receptive moment of human subjectivity. This is a different kind of listening, one attuned to the music of the other’s emotional experience rather than to the content of their narrative. Here the task is to be sufficiently open to the other so that one might be touched, thrown or moved by what they evoke in you. Far from being invasive towards the one who is communicating, such modes of understanding can have what amounts to a physical impact on the listener, one which at times is equivalent to receiving a jolt or shock or being sickened. Institutions of government can only “listen” in this way if they are prepared to be disturbed without seeking to smooth things over. Unfortunately most prefer to avoid the potential explosiveness of real contact with the emotional reality of marginalized groups, preferring more managed or simulated forms of “feedback.” We return to this
The Destructive Potential of Affect

Now let us return to the second criticism made of deliberative democracy. This holds that it is based on a conception of deliberation that marginalizes and excludes certain forms of communication. Young and other critics are right to argue that, since some groups are more closely associated with a mode of calm and dispassionate communication than others, they have greater opportunities in the forums of a deliberative democracy both to speak and to be heard. Accepting the validity of this criticism, we generally endorse Young’s demand that deliberative spaces should be opened up to more inclusive styles of speaking and to ways of giving expression to the particularity of circumstance as well as to more formal and general assertions and claims. However we are concerned that, when Young calls for a greater pluralism of communication, she does not take fully on board the way in which affective and embodied forces may be destructive as well as constructive.

To explain what we mean, let us provide by way of illustration an extract from some notes on the meeting of a Tenants’ Forum held by a local authority in east London in the early 1990s when racist sentiments were particularly strong. The Forum was held in an area with a large minority Bangladeshi population but most tenants’ leaders at that time were elderly whites. It met regularly to give local tenants a voice in the running of the public housing in their area. On this occasion the Forum had been invited to discuss the Labour-controlled local authority’s racial harassment policy. There were about twenty tenant leaders present, with a further thirty tenants present in the public gallery. Only two Bangladeshis were present; both were officers of the public authority.

This phase of the meeting revolved around a long contribution made by the only Labour councillor present. It was the only contribution which attempted to defend the racial harassment document. She was clearly nervous and spoke to begin with in a very defensive and rambling fashion. Not long into her contribution the audience began to heckle her, a process orchestrated by tenant X. The councillor tried to talk openly and honestly about some very difficult issues. She began by saying that she did not feel easy in talking about race (audience: ‘We’re not allowed to’). She rebutted accusations that Bangladeshis were responsible for bringing about infestation by cockroaches by attributing the problem to the local authority’s central heating systems (X was scornful and sarcastic at this point and openly played to the audience).

The councillor acknowledged people’s reservations on this issue (X used this as an opportunity to say to the audience: ‘they ought to be on reservations’). The councillor then made what turned out to be a fatal mistake by saying ‘We do have in Stepney to this day some all-white estates.’ At this point there was uproar both within the audience, within the tenants’ representatives, and everyone (including

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the Chair of the Forum) started shouting ‘Where?’ The chair went so far as to say that the Labour councillor’s remark was offensive and demanded that she withdraw it.41

What can we infer from this admittedly very particular example? First, it illustrates the strongly affective character of much everyday political deliberation. In this case, the mood was one of rage and cynicism. Unfortunately these sorts of recorded notes can never fully convey the intimidating atmosphere of a meeting like this. To the outside observer, the fear of the solitary supporter of the authority’s racial harassment policy was plain to see. Second, it shows that, while Young is correct to draw our attention to the “embodied and excited” forms of speech which are characteristic of those without power, such speech forms are as characteristic of the dispossessed white working-class racist as they are of women or ethnic minorities. Third, and here we draw the most important inference from the previous points, as a result of forces of group affectivity of this kind, the practices of the public spaces of deliberative democracy may not live up their official principles. Such forums may be officially regulated by a number of rules of deliberation that are intended to guarantee a free and fair debate. But in practice the intrusion of the emotional forces contained by groups into those forums is capable of undermining their effectiveness and, as we have noted, can provide the material with which political opportunists can work.

Group Cultures and Deliberative Virtues

Clearly this raises a number of issues that must be faced by any project such as Young’s that seeks to include a greater diversity of speech forms than those associated with detached and impersonal reason. It follows, in short, that we need a way of allowing the full range of emotions into the deliberative spaces of democracy that does not damage the quality of deliberation or even risk the very destruction of that democracy itself. And this means that we need an account of group emotions if we are to understand how such problems might be avoided. Bion illustrates one possible approach to this issue. His analysis of the affective forces contained by groups enables us to understand what we call the “emotional culture” of a group. If we have this kind of understanding, we can take account of emotional cultures of groups when thinking about the design of deliberative spaces – a method which is very familiar to those involved in conflict intervention.42 This means that we can take steps to ensure that the affective forces that the group creates and contains need not undermine the group. More positively, we conclude, such forces can actually be harnessed in the service of deliberative democracy. We develop this idea later when introducing Bion’s concept of “containment.”

Early on we mentioned Bion’s idea of the three basic assumptions governing group life. John Stokes has suggested that these provide typifications of certain
kinds of group culture\textsuperscript{43} which can be strongly dependent, paranoid, or salvationist. This enables us to understand the distorting and sometimes tyrannical effects of affective forces on groups, a tyranny that makes it easier for some voices to be heard rather than others. That is, even if public spaces are formally governed by rules of conduct and inhabited by citizens with deliberative virtues, such affective forces could undermine any attempt to conduct reasonable dialogue within those spaces. The prevailing basic assumption imposes a type of “group think” and “group feeling” onto the whole group so that only certain ideas and emotions are acceptable to that group. In extreme circumstances, the cultures of groups can have effects that are even more serious than the creation of emotional tyrannies. In the case of deliberative democracy, if affective forces grip a public forum with sufficient force, then that forum may abandon so many deliberative rules and neglect so many deliberative virtues that, as our example of the Tenants’ Forum illustrates, it effectively ceases to be a deliberative body.

From these reflections we conclude that a concern for deliberative virtues is undermined if the focus remains with the individual. If they are to be effective, such virtues must be inscribed in the group; that is, social movements and political parties must develop non-paranoid, non-salvationist, and non-dependent cultures. Such virtues must also be inscribed within the dialogic spaces which are created within the public sphere. This requires much more concern for, and interest in, the process of organizing politically than has occurred in the past. The organization of democracy has been approached in a largely instrumental way. Very little attention has been given to the impact of group and crowd behavior on the internal organization of representative parties or social movements or on the dynamics of dialogic spaces in the public sphere. In contrast we are advocating a non-instrumental approach, one in which deliberative and emancipatory values are applied to means and ends. In this respect we would echo David Schlosberg’s sentiment that it is in the praxis of some of the newer social movements and specifically in the importance they attach to process (means) as well as outcome (ends) that developments in the theory of deliberative democracy are likely to occur.\textsuperscript{44} To develop this claim, we turn to Bion once again.

\textbf{Containing Anxiety in Deliberative Spaces}

For Bion thought occurs where affect is contained. By “contained” he does not mean suppressed or controlled; indeed his original metaphor for the relationship between the container and what is contained is the relationship between the nurturing parent and the distressed infant.\textsuperscript{45} The infant, full of overwhelming affect, is taken into the embrace of the other who contains its distress both physically (in the bounded space of the embodied embrace) and psychologically. Put simply we could say that if the infant has experience of something that is resilient, safe, and supportive, it will calm down sufficiently to be able to feed. But it takes
in not just physical nourishment but also the idea of “a presence” which is reliably there. The gradual internalization of this presence, one which from Winnicott’s perspective is the foundation of the capacity to be alone, is vital for further development, providing the core of the child’s ontological security. Thus the repeated experience of this external containing space contributes to the development of an idea of something resilient, safe, and supportive inside the self. The affect is still there, but it is now bearable (i.e. contained); the rage has become transformed into the aggressive energy any infant needs to have a good feed and to “suck on” (later to chew on) a good idea. Thus this aggression can be used creatively to take things in or spit them out, to dissect, swallow, and digest. These are the bodily prototypes of intelligent processes. Containment therefore corresponds to the transformation of affect, not to its suppression. An affect contained provides the motive power for thought.

And so it is with the group. If its paranoia can be contained, then it can be transformed into watchfulness or caution, both potentially socially constructive emotions. A meeting, such as the one we described previously that had been called to discuss the potentially explosive issue of race, runs the risk of being overwhelmed by paranoid anxieties if no consideration is given to the way in which such affect can be contained. The task is to create a forum where different groups can bring their fears, resentments, and perhaps even initially their hatreds, to a space where they can be contained and thereby transformed. Only then can they provide the energy and tension for an interaction which is robust yet still dialogic in form, where people can talk straight without concealment or ambiguity, using words which have sharpness and clarity, words which can both affect the other and through which others can make themselves affectively understood.

Where can we turn in order to find the practical analogues to these psychoanalytic ideas? In recent years a great deal of innovation has occurred which draws on techniques originating in a variety of arenas – including the peace movement, conflict mediation, the women’s movement, and group work – which shows how we can develop to our collective capacity to contain difference and conflict in public spaces. What are some of the practices and techniques employed in these movements which aim to create public spaces capable of containing group emotions? Given that the crowd magnifies affective forces, one basic technique has been to undermine the large-group effect that often occurs in public meetings by breaking forums up into small groups, led by experienced facilitators, which then feed into structured large-group plenaries. In the 1980s, radical London local authorities such as Islington and Camden used this approach for major public consultation exercises to good effect, and now it is quite widely adopted by local government as a method of consultation. In an examination of citizens’ juries, an increasingly popular method of consultation in the UK and US today, we have coined the term “technologies of deliberation” to refer to innovations such as the use of moderators and facilitators, small break-out groups, warm-up sessions, and other methods for maximizing the effectiveness of juries’
deliberations. In smaller group settings, other methods have included giving everyone present the right to speak without interruption; Exodus call this “one meeting.” And, where conflict is likely to be considerable, disputants are expected to take it in turns to present their arguments while the opposing party is forced to listen. Other principles that have been adopted include “separating the issue from the person” (which comes from Assertion Training) and (almost universally) imposing rules of discursive constraint that prohibit the use of racist and other forms of poisonous language. If such language were to be allowed, it would destroy the boundaries that make possible the containment of affect. Using such techniques and principles, groups can survive the most violent conflicts.

As Jessica Benjamin notes, it is these processes “of breakdown and repair” which lie at the heart of real dialogue. Such innovations in democratic praxis have also led to a reconsideration of the role and style of the chair in political meetings. The original practice of chairing meetings that developed in the old labor movements was designed to give direction in fundamentally agonistic settings – hence the immensely complex procedures involving resolutions, amendments, addenda, riders, counter-amendments, composites, and so on. Today those chairing meetings, including some local politicians and government officers, are developing new skills that give emphasis to the facilitation of groups rather than their control.

It is people’s particularistic interests and group identities which make them passionate. If they are deprived of these, they become reasonable and domesticated citizens – and democracy becomes predictable and dull. In Britain under Blair there are signs that this is where we may be heading – as focus groups and citizens’ juries become the preferred method of local citizen participation, and managed policy forums and party conferences become the preferred method of sedating an unruly national political party. What is common to all of these techniques is the way in which they individualize the citizen and abstract them from their group identities – that is, from the basis of their partisanship. At times it seems as if bureaucratic control has been replaced by therapeutic control. Of course this is a danger with the kinds of ideas that we have been developing in this article: that this is where a concern for group processes and emotional dynamics can so easily lead. In contrast we have argued that a deliberative democracy built upon the particularisms of interest and identity is possible. If sufficient thought is given to the emotional cultures of groups and the dynamics of inter-group encounters, then spaces can be created where politics can take account of people’s feelings, and conflict can be contained but not suppressed. In such spaces people can argue, fight, laugh, and sometimes even agree in the knowledge that the situation is safe enough for relationships to endure while feelings are expressed.

**Conclusion**

In this article the underlying difficulty that we have been wrestling with is the tendency for analytical thinking about deliberative democracy to become separated...
from lived experiences of democracy in action. Anyone who has attended a public meeting in their town or city, or who has engaged in heated debates about a policy issue in their local community association, will quickly appreciate the powerful emotions that public deliberation often elicits. Where particularistic interests are involved, and where citizens involved in deliberation bring their group identities with them, affective forces are liable to be magnified. In light of this concern, our general thesis has been that deliberative democracy can provide a valuable method for making collective decisions, but it can do so only if it is developed in light of an understanding of group emotions. It is our contention that, if deliberative democrats are armed with such an understanding, they will be able to harness the powerful effects of such emotions on the public spaces of deliberation. A few final remarks are called for.

Given the context in which we are writing, it is perhaps inevitable that we have called upon two traditions of psychoanalysis that originated in the UK. But this does not mean that we are unaware of some possible limitations to these traditions, particularly the relational concept of impulse that lies at their heart. For while the strength of these perspectives lies in their insistence that impulse cannot be understood except in relation to the object (hence this is a profoundly socialized account of human motivation), their weakness lies in their neglect of that other strand in Freud’s work which, in stressing the wildness of the emotions, saw the object as the most contingent aspect of impulse. Thus, for example, since a Deleuzean account of affect would give far more emphasis to its unrootedness and to its free-flowing nature, it would potentially offer a more radical challenge to what we have described as the “rationalist” assumptions underlying much of deliberative democracy.

In light of these considerations, we must stress that the significance of the argument that we have put forward here does not depend upon the validity of the Kleinian and Bionic perspective that we have used. It is worth noting that, while we draw almost exclusively on this account of the emotions in this article, it is not necessary to endorse the specific details of such an approach in order to accept the general argument that we are making. That is, one could agree that groups have emotional dynamics that must be understood if they are not adversely to affect the workings of such groups, while rejecting the particular account that Klein and Bion offer in favor of an alternative theorization of the role of the affective in the development of the capacity for understanding the other.

Our aim here has been to persuade the advocates of deliberative democracy of the importance of an understanding of the emotions for both the theory and practice of their favored political system. For this purpose it is sufficient that the following basic tenets are accepted as worthy of debate:

1. neither cognition or affect can be properly understood separately from the other – reason must always be understood in terms of its relation to both cognition and affect;
(2) there is no possibility of communication that does not have an affective element; and

(3) the emotions, like power, are always located in social relations, particularly group relations, rather than within the space of the individual.

Finally note that, in putting forward these propositions, we are not seeking to counter-pose an affective ontology to rationality. We are trying to offer a fuller form of rationality, one in which the capacity of the individual and the group to recognize the feelings underlying thoughts and the capacity to think about feelings are maximized. We might think of this as a passionate rationality, one we believe can offer a more thoughtful approach to the difficulties we encounter when seeking to understand one another and when reaching for more creative solutions to the problems that we face together.

NOTES


2. It should be noted that, while this phrase comes from Anthony Giddens, Beyond Left and Right: The Future for Radical Politics (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), he uses it to refer to something rather different to the conception being developed in this paper.


6. Ibid., 349.


8. Ibid., 70.


11. Young, “Asymmetrical reciprocity,” 120.

12. Ibid., 124. Developing this final point a little further, we would argue, against Elster’s implicit assumption, that it is not necessarily the case that passionate speech is biased, and calm argument is impartial: one can passionately present one’s public reasons, and coolly present one’s prejudices. Elster seems to confuse conviction with rhetoric.


15. Ibid., 131. Forester, The Deliberative Practitioner, 137.


18. In the UK this is, for example, expressed in the work of organizations formed by those who have endured the hazards of contemporary psychiatry such as Survivors Speak Out.

While the work of Klein is becoming quite well known, that of Bion is less familiar to non-psychanalytic audiences. Wilfred Bion is a key figure in post-Kleinian psychoanalysis. See for example, P. Bion-Talamo, F. Borgogno, and S. Merciai, eds., *Bion’s Legacy to Groups* (London: Karnac Books, 1998); G. Bleandonu, *Wilfred Bion: His Life and Works* (London: Free Association Books, 1994); and J. and N. Symington, *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (London: Routledge, 1996). He is also the originator of the Group Relations tradition that has used psychoanalytic insights in working with groups and organisations. In the conventional history, the theory of group psychoanalysis begins with Freud’s paper on “Group psychology and the analysis of the ego” from 1921. But it takes off as a tradition of its own after World War II. Bion is one of the most important early figures in this tradition. He was himself analysed by Klein, and in his later work he developed a very dense and idiosyncratic reworking of her ideas. But it is his early work as a pioneer of the use of groups for educational and therapeutic purposes that we are also interested in here. Bion began his first experiments with therapy for groups at Northfield Military Hospital in WWII. Later on he developed his ideas further at the Tavistock Clinic in London. The Tavistock Institute for Human Relations and the AK Rice Institute in the US have carried on his work to this day. The Group Relations tradition has engaged in the theoretical study of group behaviour by using experiential “conferences”; and, at a practical level, the results of this work are now applied by consultants across a wide range of public and private organizations. See, for example, R. French and R. Vince, eds., *Group Relations, Management and Organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).


P. Fleiss, *Attention and Interpretation* (London: Tavistock, 1970). This phrase has become something of a cause celebre within contemporary psychoanalysis. The general conclusion is that...
this is probably an impossible demand, that noone, not even the most sussed out analyst can be entirely free from thoughts or desires regarding the other which make them partially unavailable to the other.

53. For a detailed example, see Harrison, Hoggett, and Jeffers, “Race, ethnicity and community development.”
55. In the UK the bible for activist organisers in the old Labour movement was W. Hannington, *Mr. Chairman! A Short Guide to the Conduct and Procedure of Meetings* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950).
56. The interest of the Blair government in “emotional literacy” in schools also has this Janus-headed quality to it.


59. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this essay who drew our attention to the work of Peter Fonagy; see, for example, P. Fonagy, “Thinking about thinking: some clinical and theoretical considerations in the treatment of a borderline patient,” International Journal of Psycho-Analysis 72 (1991): 639–55; M. Target and P. Fonagy, “Playing with reality: II. The development of psychic reality from a theoretical perspective,” International Journal of Psycho-Analysis 77 (1996): 459–79. Fonagy provides a different although he feels probably complimentary perspective to the Kleinian theory of development. Drawing on contemporary Freudian psychoanalysis and developmental psychology, Fonagy is concerned to trace the emergence of a theory of mind in the young child. This may prove to be particularly relevant to debates in political theory concerning the question how, if at all, is it possible to understand the other. Fonagy’s “theory of mind” is concerned precisely with how the child learns of the existence of mental states involving beliefs and affects in the other – something he calls “mentalization” in contrast to the Kleinian focus on “symbolization.” The absence of this capacity to attribute mental states to another may have much to do with autism.