

Deliberation is for Judgment: Preparing Students for the Actually Existing Public Sphere

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From Aristotle to Dewey, the purpose of public education has been defined as a pedagogy of citizenship. Students are not only instructed in the core knowledge of their political system but also trained in the competencies necessary to participate as citizens. Expanding civic education beyond facts about the structure of government requires the cultivation of proper civic dispositions among students and the development of their capacities for civic practices (Callon 2004; McAvoy and Hess 2013). As a result, educators committed to providing a civic education to their students must, either explicitly or implicitly, endorse a theory of the public sphere and the role of citizens in the political process.

The dominant conceptualization of the public sphere—both within political science as an academic discipline and democratic education as a field of pedagogy—derives from the foundational work of Habermas. In the Habermasian tradition, the public sphere is a communicative space where citizens assemble to identify issues of common concern, exchange reasons for competing proposals, and arrive at a rational consensus on political ends. In tying democratic outcomes (representative policies and political legitimacy) to democratic processes (inclusive participation and reasoned argumentation), Habermas's vision of deliberative democracy has prompted innovations in local governance from Portland, Oregon (Gastil and Knobloch 2020) to Porto Alegre, Brazil (Baiocchi, Heller, and Silva 2011). It has also inspired the development of deliberative pedagogy in higher education, as instructors reimagine college classrooms as sites for group discussion and consensus formation (Samuelsson 2018; Archibugi, Bavastrelli, and Cellini 2021).

For decades, however, empirical research in political science has demonstrated that most citizens fail to live up to the normative expectations of Habermas's public sphere and perhaps never have (Schudson 1998). Participation in voluntary organizations has been on the decline for decades (Putnam 2000; Skocpol) and rarely provide opportunities for citizens to deliberate over disagreements (Eliasoph 1998; Mutz 2006). Instead, civic initiatives have become increasingly professionalized (Lee 2014), with decision-making being concentrated at the top of the organizational chart (Fisher, Eliasoph 2011). Most students—even political science graduates—are unlikely ever to engage in a public assembly. They are similarly unlikely to engage in reasoned deliberation on public issues (Bail), much less reach a consensus across lines of difference. If they do, there are vanishingly few opportunities to translate that consensus into a decision with collectively-binding force.

This paper argues that this mismatch between normative expectations and civic action does not reveal the shortcomings of students or of citizens, but of the dominant definition of the public sphere. Only by understanding what Adut (2018:11) calls the “constitutive asymmetry of the public sphere” can we envision the proper role available citizens in contemporary democracies and the skills and practices educators must cultivate in students to enhance the democratic potential of these practices. I argue that many aspects of deliberative pedagogy—such as the “justification of views through reasons and reflection on the reasons of others” (Samuelsson 2018:2)—remain critical to the practice of citizenship in contemporary democracies. However, these procedural methods should no longer be put in the service of Habermasian consensus-formation, a practice reserved for the very few, but instead towards strengthening what Arendt called *judgment*. This faculty, developed in communication among diverse others but exercised independently, best leverages the structural position of the citizen within the actually existing public sphere into a positive contribution to democratic governance.

The Habermasian Public Sphere

Habermas developed his theory of the public sphere within a wider analysis of a complex, interdependent social system. The public sphere is not a self-contained and autonomous arena of social interaction but is instead constructed through the boundary relations it shares with other fields of political and social activity, including the private sphere, state power, and the market (Structural Transformation). Whereas these separate spheres have their own internal logic proper to their prototypical activity (e.g. setting and enforcing laws, steering economic production and distribution), the public sphere is governed by what Habermas called “communicative rationality.” That is, citizens under conditions of equality enjoy pragmatic motivations towards providing and soliciting reasons to coordinate their actions. The back-and-forth process of reaching intersubjective understanding ensures that conclusions reached among participants are both reasonable and representative, conferring upon collectively binding positions a high degree of democratic legitimacy. This, in turn, justifies and strengthens the autonomy of other spheres, and contributes to the function of the democratic system overall.

In situating the reasoning process within the pragmatic orientation of uncoerced speech, Habermas connects the social capacity of public-spirited communication to the political purpose of legitimating decisions that bind the group. Habermas believed that the public sphere could be the source of rational decision-making because “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech” v1 287. That is, a pragmatic logic undergirds communication, providing speakers with motivations to make their proposals intelligible to one another. Listeners’ questions help expose gaps in understanding as speakers’ reasons attempt to fill them. For Habermas, this process presupposes its own motivation: If others were not needed to resolve our problems, we would not engage them in communication. If we could not hope for our interlocutors to understand what we are saying, we would not bother with justifying our proposals. The empirical fact of our communicative undertakings reveals the pragmatic orientations of the act (Communication and the Evolution of Society Habermas 1976). Hence, as people proceed in communication—or in deliberation—they should expect understandings of perspectives to deepen, the link between proposed actions and justifying reasons to strengthen, and collective decisions to cohere around intersubjective

understandings of the situation (ToCAv1). This is why Habermas, in one of his more memorable lines, claimed that when communication is neither coerced nor constrained, deliberation will be steered by “the unforced force of the better argument” (BFaN: 306). The purpose of the social and political system—from government institutions to the guaranteeing of fundamental rights—is to secure the public sphere from undue coercion and constraint, so that public communication can flourish. That is, genuine publicity is conducive towards, if not constitutive of communicative rationality.

So far, the boundary relations between the political and the public spheres have been described as moving in one direction: a properly institutionalized public sphere is one structured from without, where laws and rights guarantee access to public communication and ensure the formal equality of participants. However, Habermas also insisted that the public sphere generate outputs that effectively shape the affairs of state and market. In healthy democratic systems, the “better arguments” produced through communicative exchange in the public sphere serve to influence and legitimate conduct within the government and economy. The pragmatic tendency of communicating publics to work towards consensus is thus buttressed by the conviction among deliberators that collective decisions will hold binding force. Absent the belief that a hard-won consensus in the public sphere will be reflected in public policy, citizens will have little incentive to communicate rationally. After all, why would individuals resolve to work through difficult public disagreements if their conclusions fail to impact the lives of participants? If consensus has nowhere to go, it is unlikely to be reached in the first place.

As we have seen, in Habermas’s formulation, publicity and consensus-seeking are vital for unleashing the latent potential of rational communication among citizens. Publicity provides the platform for exchanging civic-minded views in pluralist societies and the goal of reaching consensus motivates speakers to provide their skeptics with quality reasons and to listen attentively to competing proposals (on deliberative “listening”, see Scudder). In the following two sections, I aim to challenge both of these assumptions of the public sphere. First, I review Adut’s “realist” redescription of the public sphere not as an arena of pre-assigned civic purpose but as a contingent assemblage of attention. I examine how publicity conceived in this way at once decreases opportunities for popular participation and produces poorer arguments. These dynamics, I will argue, reveal the public sphere that students will enter is very different than that posited by Habermas and suggest reconsidering the civic skills we should be cultivating in our students. In the subsequent section, I examine what kinds of civic virtues are practical within this actually existing sphere, where participation on the model imagined by Habermas is not possible and where consensus across the citizenry is low. Before concluding with lessons for democratic education, I argue that deliberation is better suited toward enhancing the democratic potential of Arendtian *judgment* rather than Habermasian consensus.

A ‘Realist’ Alternative?

Habermas’s theory of the public sphere relies on the elegant balance between structural arrangements and pragmatic motivations, between the inherently democratic process of uncoerced speech and the ensuing democratic outcome of political decisions legitimated by the public.

Although Habermas is careful to ground the normative thrust of public action within the unfettered exchange of practical reasons, not all critics have been convinced that the Habermasian public sphere is free of idealist foundations. A recent attempt to reconceptualize that public sphere in a “realist” mode abandons the systemic contingency of Habermas’s public sphere in favor of an analysis of *publicity* as a social condition of, in Adut’s words, “sensory access.” That is, the public sphere is not defined normatively so much as descriptively: what is public is not what is formally structured by right and driven by a democratic purpose, it is a space whose contents are open to general scrutiny (2018:23).

Adut’s idiosyncratic definition of the public sphere is best illustrated through example. In Adut’s conceptualization, voting—“the very essence of citizenship”—is not a public act but a private one, unless it takes place at a caucus, in which it changes. A conversation, for Adut, is a private form of communication; if others eavesdrop, it becomes a public address—a qualitatively different thing. And the prize procedure of Habermasian democratic legitimacy—deliberation—is likely only to come about in situations where it is shielded from public view. Just witness how legislative deliberations devolve into moral grandstanding on issues that attract a high degree of public attention (Lynch).

Adut’s twist on the ‘public’ is neither semantic or trivial. In each of these cases, the ability of a public to look and listen in changes the dynamics of action considerably. Political caucus voters nominate more extreme candidates than do voters in primaries in part because the ability of fellow partisans to observe an individual voter’s professed allegiances exposes apostates to social scrutiny.

Conversations among strangers are not guided solely by pragmatic motivations to enhance intersubjective understanding. They are also subject to social desirability biases, as participants shore up their status within the group by endorsing dominant viewpoints (Sunstein). When the conversation is expanded to include not just participants but observers, as in legislative sessions, the motives of speakers change from persuasion to performance, as partisans cheer on as their champions score points against their opponents (Lynch; Mutz 2015). Even the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates were not a sober affair. Most of the crowd could not hear the unamplified speakers even if they wanted to. Instead, they were a spectacle—“the best show in town”—where “Douglas’s opening speech in Ottawa[, Illinois] was interrupted over and over by cries of ‘Hit him Again’ and ‘Put it at him’ and ‘That’s it,’ and ‘He can’t dodge you’ and other enthusiastic expostulations” (Schudson 1998:137).

Clearly, publicity is no guarantor of solemnity or the civic-spirited commitment to communicative rationality. But the Lincoln-Douglas debates also reveal a second aspect of Adut’s redefinition of the public sphere. This is the “constitutive asymmetry” of publicity—the civic paradox that the more public an event becomes (i.e. the more people who are able to view it) the less each person is able to participate in the action. Even if the citizens composing the audience of the Lincoln-Douglas debates approached the exchange with the kind of civic-minded spirit that Habermas envisions for the public, they can contribute little more to the exchange than their jeering peers. Deliberation, which thrives on inclusivity as both an ethic (Schneiderhan and Khan) and an optimizer of decisions (Landemere), is very difficult to scale. Adut’s conclusion, then is difficult to gainsay: The public is in a real sense defined not by participants but by spectators.

What does this mean for democratic education? If Habermas's ideal citizen is not practicable for most students—either empirically or theoretically—what image of citizenship should replace it? Adut valorizes the spectator as one unburdened from the inauthentic pressures to perform that accompany acting in the public. His hero, instead, the *flâneur*: “a character who strolls about the city, without interacting, without a concern for the common good, engrossed in the utter ecstasy of watching, governed by nothing except his [sic] ardent curiosity” (2018:150). This is a rather uninspiring model for citizenship, one that would seem to curtail the ambitions of democratic education quite radically. Fortunately, there are alternatives. In the next section, I explore Arendt's unfinished work on the faculty of political judgment. Like Adut, Arendt recognizes that inevitability of spectators in public life. However, the Arendtian spectator is not a passive viewer but instead plays a singular political role unavailable to public actors. This citizen-as-judge presents a more positive and practicable ideal for democratic education.

From the Vita Activa to the Judging Spectator: Arendt's Other Public Actor

At first glance, it seems odd to turn to Arendt as a theorist of political spectation. She is more famous for her diagnosis of the public realm as a “space of appearance” where, through acts of public speech, one “discloses” oneself and thus becomes a fully-formed, authentic citizen. Her vaunting of the *vita activa* not only posed a critique of contemporary democracies' heralding of production and consumption as the virtues of public life but promised a model of impassioned and combative civic participation to rival Habermas's rational consensus-seeker (Honig).¹ But Arendt also recognized that *action*, as she defined it, was neither the only public virtue nor was it one without costs (Truth and Politics). Like Adut, Arendt recognized that *action*, as she defines it, is, by mathematical necessity, a practice of the few: “the public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not the actors or the makers” (63). However, what she called the *vita contemplativa* produced a person with higher purpose than the disinterested stroll of Adut's *flâneur*. Her third, unfinished volume of her masterwork, *The Life of the Mind*, was to consider a critical faculty cultivated in contemplation that is not available to the most active politico: judgment.

Among her published writings, the most developed presentation of her theory of judgment comes in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (year). In Arendt's reading, Kantian aesthetics have direct political implications. Kant the rationalist believed that universal truths could be divined through the application of reason. On matters of truth, therefore, there can be no legitimate disagreement—answers are definitive and impersonal. However, aesthetic tastes stake no claim to objectivity: there are no criteria that compel a certain response, nor logical operations by which right answers can be ascertained. This does not mean, however, that tastes are arbitrary judgments, or that any expression of taste has equal claim to validity. Kant was no populist, much less a poptimist. Instead, he argued that aesthetic tastes can be justified—made sensible—within recognizable standards and conventions, means of organizing into contestable but defensible categories like the beautiful.

Arendt saw political values as operating in precisely the same way. As with aesthetic tastes, political “judgments are not arrived at by either deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in

¹ This agonist critique of Habermas has also spawned a rich tradition in democratic education. See especially Ruitenberg and Tryggvason.

common with logical operations” (4). One cannot assert that the universal rightness of a political proposal in the way that one can demonstrate a geometric proof. But this does not make all such proposals plausible any more than it makes any object beautiful. Sound political judgments require what Arendt called an “enlarged mentality”—the ability to evaluate and assess a political question from many sides.

Crucially, just as with Kantian aesthetics, the development of an “enlarged mentality” necessitates consort with others. The public realm thus remains of vital importance to good judgment. As Arendt (42) made clear, “one cannot learn without publicity, without the testing that arises from contact with other people’s thinking.” However, Arendt envisioned this ‘testing’ of judgment as a process very distinct from the active self-disclosure that, for her, constituted public speech. Actors, like those in Adut’s conceptualization of the public sphere, are, in a sense, always performers: “the actor, because he is part of the play, must enact his part—he is partial by definition” (Arendt 55). Although she is speaking metaphorically of actors on the theatrical stage, the same could be said about those enacting the *vita activa*. Political action is always *partial*—interested, teleological. This investment in a particular outcome is necessary for arguing forcefully and for performing strategically. But, for Arendt, it also corrodes the faculty of judgment.

Here, Arendt locates in the spectator a secret superpower that Adut, in his diagnosis of the “character...without a concern for the common good,” does not. Spectation does not relieve the observer of the responsibility to act; instead, the distance from the action enables the observer to judge. The Adut-ian spectator is disinterested, whereas the Arendtian spectator is impartial: “Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection” (43). Publicity, in Adut’s sense, “opens” these distinct standpoints to the spectator, who, residing outside the fray and without partisan stakes, is able to think critically. The spectator must engage the public, but she decidedly does *not* do so to reach a collective decision, as the hero of the Habermasian public sphere is expected to do. This faculty of judgment is precisely what I believe a deliberative classroom might aspire to develop in students.

Conclusion: Deliberation is for Judgment

Deliberative pedagogy has taken inspiration from Habermas’s theory to implement classroom interventions that are inclusive, pluralist, and oriented towards providing reasons. I take these qualities as intrinsic goods that belong in any democratic vision of education. However, most educators train these capacities towards the formation of a group consensus on political issues, a project that I have tried to show is at once empirically unavailable and theoretically impossible in contemporary public spheres. When classroom deliberations aim for consensus, often the same pernicious elements of publicity diagnosed by Adut (2018) reappear in student conduct. As Saetra found, students had no difficulty reaching agreement and were in fact too quick to coalesce around proposals: social desirability constrained their willingness to critique their peers and led to dissenting views to be left unsaid. Crocco et al. (2018:7) found that the limited time frame afforded to “resolving” complex political problems in the classroom encouraged students to talk past one another, “voic[ing] their already held beliefs.” What Samuelsson (2018) refers to as the “regulative

ideal” of consensus-seeking as motivation to give good reasons ultimately backfires as students determine it is better to assent to strong assertions than expose themselves to social risks.

These studies show that consensus is perhaps no more possible in the deliberative classroom than it is in the public sphere. Citizens argue with one another, they read one another, they post to and about one another, but they seldom make decisions together, much less binding decisions of political import. When they *do* decide, they express their decision in private, as a vote. That is, acts of citizens in the contemporary public sphere are acts of spectatorship, imagined by Arendt as the process of cultivating an “enlarged mentality”—an “*impartiality* [that] is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account” (42, emphasis in the original). The deliberative classroom—freed from the “regulative ideal” of consensus-seeking—can leverage the positive features of deliberation towards a more practicable, reasonable end.