A feeling for democracy? Rhetoric, power and the emotions

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A feeling for democracy? Rhetoric, power and the emotions

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Emotions are an inescapable yet persistently troubling presence in democratic life. Typically, this emerges in relation to controversies over rhetoric, especially anxieties over the potential of speech to mobilise irrational and antidemocratic sentiments. Such is the view of ‘deliberative democrats’ who denounce rhetoric as emotional manipulation, subverting the neutral space of rational dialogue. However, research inspired by neuroscience and psychoanalysis suggests reason and emotion are inseparable and cognitive judgement is intrinsically receptive to affective techniques of persuasion. A rhetorically inclined democracy, I argue, acknowledges the political role of emotions in securing public attention and allegiance, and negotiating power relations strategically.

Keywords: emotions; rhetoric; democracy; psychoanalysis; neuroscience

Introduction

Democratic politics is, undoubtedly, an emotional business. Intended precisely to channel popular feelings into government but also to restrain them through debate, criticism and compromise, democracy regularly stages our, often contradictory, attitudes towards emotion. More often than not this plays out in a rhetorical register, that is, in controversies over who can say what, where they can say it and how.

Take, for example, the public dispute in October 2009 over the appearance of Nick Griffin MEP, the leader of the British National Party, on the BBC television show, Question time. A vocal constituency argued that a public broadcaster was an inappropriate host for someone with highly contentious views on immigration and leading a party known for its fiercely prejudicial views on race. Letting him speak on a legitimate platform was morally wrong because his opinions mobilised undemocratic sentiments. Others, however, claimed that an elected representative was in fact properly required to expose his views to criticism and should be permitted to appear, however objectionable the opinions. The BBC held firm and, despite physical protests outside the studios, Griffin took his place on the show’s panel. In the end, it was the live audience that, with aplomb, took Griffin to task for the vacuity of his beliefs and opinions (see BBC News 2009).

The Griffin case exemplifies the way the question of power and emotions come to the fore rhetorically. Rhetoric – the so-called ‘art’ of speech and persuasion – concerns the means and manner of communication. In a democracy, it is speech (in the form of spoken words or written text) that more often than not provides this means. The manner of speech, therefore, takes on a heightened importance – the words, styles and techniques of public argumentation mediating exchanges and...
shaping the wider political space. The issues of what one says, where and how carry an emotive force that, at times, imbues speech with a potential for danger, perhaps even violence. For this reason, political philosophers from Plato through to the present have sought regularly to diminish the function of rhetoric in politics (see Garsten 2006).

In this article, I explore the way democratic theorists connect emotions and power via the question of rhetoric. I take issue with efforts by so-called ‘deliberative democrats’ to reduce power relations by eradicating or minimising rhetorical exchanges. As I shall argue, at work here is an unconvincing separation of reason and emotion and an impoverished conception of democratic space as a neutral realm of transparent communication. I then sketch the insights of thinkers inspired by neuroscience and psychoanalysis, both of which understand cognitive judgement as one moment in a wider, affective process. If ‘emotions’ are observable human responses that come with attendant feelings (such as anger or joy), ‘affects’ describe the unconscious intensities and movements that provoke and stimulate emotion. Rather than distortions of reason, emotions are conduits of affect that prompt feelings and orient cognition. Despite important differences in locating and defining emotions, each approach foregrounds a dynamic network of connections moving between memories, feelings and cognitions that is intrinsically receptive to rhetorical techniques. These techniques, which I place under the broad heading ‘affective rhetorical strategies’, invite an alternative conception of democratic encounters as sites of competition for attention and allegiance, not reasoned argument alone. Such encounters demand not the exclusion of rhetoric and emotion but, rather, a greater appreciation of how these may be negotiated and contested.

**Deliberation: a non-rhetorical democracy?**

The deliberative model of democracy came to prominence in Anglo-American democratic theory from the 1990s onwards. It is now a well-established framework taking a variety of directions, not all of which fully align (see Warren 2002). Indeed, one commentator argues there are now at least three generations of deliberative democrats, each with their own preoccupations and distinguishing features (Elstub 2010).

In essence, the deliberative model promotes democratic practices in which citizens take an active part by exchanging views and informing and persuading each other by giving reasons for their judgements prior to any formal decision-making. In fact, not all deliberative democrats emphasise taking decisions. Some conceive deliberation as an end in itself, one that produces a dynamic and open ‘public sphere’ that generates informed opinion. Either way, the term ‘deliberation’ denotes an inclusive process of discussion and dialogue where different judgements and reasons are elaborated, defended, criticised and revised. As Warren summarises: ‘Deliberation induces individuals to give due consideration to their judgements, so that they know what they want, understand what others want, and can justify their judgements to others as well as to themselves’ (Warren 2002, p. 173). This emphasis on the process (rather than just the outcome) of communication gives priority to the democratic legitimisation of opinion, decisions or legislation by shared speaking, listening and the forming of common judgements (see Parkinson 2003). Specific demands and claims achieve legitimacy through practical deliberation and not
because they purport to be rational, intrinsically just or simply ‘in tune’ with common opinion.

The motivation for enhancing deliberation arose primarily from a sense of the limitations of prevailing models of electoral democracy and its alternatives. Deliberative democrats typically oppose themselves to the ‘aggregative’ model; that is, the model of mass franchise – but limited participation – electoral democracy now well established in Europe, the USA and beyond. Goodin calls this ‘minimalist democracy’ (Goodin 2008, p. 1) and we can see why. Liberal democracy consists primarily in an electoral system that sends representatives to legislatures on behalf of citizens. Citizens’ votes are aggregated – simply added together – and governments with policy agendas are formed as a consequence of those accumulated choices. While parties and politicians may seek to shape voters’ preferences, the vital moment in this type of democracy is when citizens vote.

Deliberative democrats view this as an impoverished conception of democracy, one that fails to grasp the vital importance of legitimacy in sustaining democratic government (see Young 2000, pp. 19–21). For them, a sense of trust in government is required to sustain our cooperation. If we lose, we must nevertheless feel as though we lost fairly and that the system still deserves our support. That legitimacy, they argue, is better achieved by our active taking part in ways other than voting. Rather than remaining silent, we often prefer to voice our concerns, to promote particular issues we support and to persuade others to change their preferences or, indeed, invite them to change ours. This can be achieved only by offering opportunities for greater deliberation among the public than electoral democracy supplies. Crucially, the aggregative model refuses to treat preferences as changeable. Its proponents assume people come to political encounters already persuaded of their essential (self-)interest. For deliberative democrats, on the other hand, preferences are always revisable, open to critical interrogation and, subsequently, transformation in a process of dialogue.

How, then, is deliberation to occur? Proponents of deliberative democracy envisage a variety of scenarios at different scales and degrees of formality, from expanded ‘town hall’ style meetings, citizens’ juries or revised legislative assemblies for regular and more inclusive discussion, to specific issue-based arrangements for gathering opinion locally or on distinct matters of public policy (see Parkinson 2006, Goodin 2008, Fishkin 2009). For some, deliberation can be added to existing institutions of electoral democracy; for others, they may substitute those institutions. We might also include the numerous efforts at negotiating agreement in community disputes or civil conflict peace-talks such as those in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s. There are many different venues for employing deliberative methods where previously elite bargaining or secret talks were the norm.

What has preoccupied deliberative democrats, however, is how to conceive deliberation as a process of inclusive communication undertaken in conditions that permit participants to meet as equals. Thus early proponents devoted attention to specifying the ideal form, or ‘normative preconditions’, to deliberation itself. In short, it is claimed that arguments must conform to certain conditions or standards if they are to be considered valid contributions. As Warren summarises it, these conditions are usually that such arguments appeal to common rather than sectarian interests, such that everyone can conceivably agree to them; that they involve factual and truthful claims rather than purely self-serving interpretations; and that
participants are sincere in employing their arguments, rather than seeking to deceive others about their views or intentions (see Warren 2002, p. 183).

How these normative conditions are defended varies from thinker to thinker. Habermas, for instance, has famously argued that deliberative rules are implicit presuppositions contained in any communicative practice. To speak at all, he claims, we have to assume a certain ‘ideal speech situation’: ‘anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity-claims and suppose that they can be vindicated’ (Habermas 1996a, p. 119). That is, all moral demands imply certain standards of rationality and impartiality that can be redeemed in the procedures of democratic deliberation: namely, that the demands are universally understood, that they are sincere and that they are true. Democracy should, in his view, approximate that ideal by eliminating ‘distortions’ to communication and permitting moral claims to be collectively validated. Habermas’ ideal informs his account of ‘discourse ethics’ (Habermas 1996b, pp. 180–192). Gutmann and Thompson (1996), on the other hand, defend the idea of ‘reciprocity’ as the root principle and precondition of deliberative encounters, along with notions of publicity and accountability. For them, reciprocity demands that ‘a citizen offers reasons that can be accepted by others who are similarly motivated to find reasons that can be accepted by others’ (Ibid., p. 53). Regardless of whether it can be presupposed of all communication, Gutmann and Thompson follow Habermas in seeking a standard by which moral argumentation takes place on an equal footing; where citizens can accept each others’ reasons as valid without necessarily agreeing their conclusions.

Central to deliberative democracy, then, is the claim that dialogue should be transparent and free of the distorting influence of interests or deception. Deliberation must be honestly motivated and not manipulative. If it is not proposed that participants free themselves entirely from ‘outside’ influences, nevertheless they must divest their arguments of any trace of strategy such that listeners might be deceived into accepting reasons whose motivations are not fully evident. Encouraging others to do so is tantamount to changing preferences by coercion. As Dryzek (2000, p. 8) claims, there is only deliberation when ‘domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expressions of mere self-interest, threats, and the imposition of ideological conformity are all absent’. Presumably, then, that means not arguing from religious premises or readings of sacred texts not shared by others, unless these can be translated into more general claims. Equally, we must exclude overt expressions of ridicule, mockery, contempt, anger or sarcasm; we cannot quietly hint at the prospect of violence should others disagree, or flirt with and charm those who do agree.

It is for these reasons that many – though not all – proponents of deliberative democracy explicitly reject rhetoric. By ‘rhetoric’, they tend to mean direct appeals to emotion or to personal authority; what classical rhetoricians termed pathos and ethos, respectively. Efforts to change the preferences of others in the process of deliberation must appeal solely to reason, or logos. Only rational deliberation, it is claimed, can ensure transparent communication and common agreement. For arguments to be deemed rational, they must conform to standards of universality, truthfulness and sincerity. Emotion, by contrast, is presumed to be manipulative in so far as it bypasses reason and invites participants to accept arguments on the basis of unexamined feelings and automatic responses to symbols that do not bear rational scrutiny. Likewise, appeals to personal authority are thought to ask participants to accept conclusions regardless of good reasons. In the words of
Habermas, persuasion should be achieved only by ‘the force of the better argument’, not the deceptive tools of rhetoric.

Not all deliberative democrats take this hard line on rhetoric, however. Young (2000) and Dryzek (2000), for example, are among those who explicitly invite different kinds of communicative style. Young, for example, rejects the notion of ‘dispassionate, unsituated, neutral reason’ as a ‘fiction’ with ‘exclusionary implications’ (Young 2000, p. 63). While she endorses the ‘basic outlines’ of the deliberative model and even Habermas’s account of communicative action (see Ibid., p. 26, 34), she prefers a less rigorous application of public reason. All communication is rhetorical, she insists, because it tries to produce effects on its listeners; meaning and effect (or ‘locution’ and ‘perlocution’ in the speech-act theory employed by Habermas) are in practice inseparable. The important distinction for her is not between reason and rhetoric but between ‘communicative acts that aim to further understanding and cooperation and those that operate strategically as means of using others for one’s own ends’ (Ibid., p. 66).

Thus for Young, rhetoric can have affirmative uses for inclusive democratic communication, such as getting issues onto the agenda by introducing new topics; allowing people to speak in ways appropriate to their situation, using language in an idiom with which they feel comfortable; and encouraging the formation of judgements in situations of uncertainty. She highlights the value of ‘narrative’ forms of communication that express local and culturally ‘situated’ forms of knowledge that might otherwise be excluded from ascetic versions of public reason (Ibid., pp. 70–77). Of course, giving licence to non-rational forms of communication in order to ‘enlarge’ the conversation may introduce the possibility of deception and manipulation into the deliberative scenario. But for Young, only exposure to broad public criticism, not adherence to a rigid conception of reason, can eliminate or reduce such strategies. She remains convinced, perhaps optimistically, that the deliberative ends of communication and mutual understanding can be achieved without interruption or distortion.

For Dryzek, too, rhetoric need not be exclusively a method of manipulation. He concurs with the spirit of Young’s argument: namely, that rhetorical appeals are particularly effective in reaching out to a wide audience ‘by framing points in a language that will move the audience in question’ (Dryzek 2000, p. 52). Being able to ‘move’ the audience’s feelings provides an argument with greater thrust, helping it ‘transmit’ its rational core further than it would otherwise. Dryzek cites Rev. Martin Luther King’s oratory and the US declaration of independence as examples of successful appeals that have supported rather than undermined rational judgements. The issue, then, is not to eliminate rhetoric entirely but, as he puts it elsewhere, to minimise ‘categorically ugly rhetoric’ in favour of rhetoric that has some positive ‘systemic’ effects, that is, that produces further rational deliberation (Dryzek 2010, p. 333). He cites President George W. Bush’s advocacy of a ‘war on terror’ as an example of ugly rhetoric because of the ‘denigration directed at any actor not totally aligned with the Bush administration’s position’ (Ibid.). Ugly rhetoric inhibits further deliberation by closing down dissent or prejudging the opinions of others, thereby eliminating the need to engage them in dialogue. Yet, at the same time, Dryzek also recognises that some ugly rhetoric can contribute to expanding deliberation, perhaps despite its intentions. For example, the opposed positions of the parties in the Northern Ireland peace talks later contributed to fruitful dialogue.
Although, as Dryzek goes on to claim, deliberative democrats are increasingly open to rhetorical appeals (both to ethos and pathos) as legitimate devices in deliberation, it is clear that for him, as for most others, reason remains both distinct and superior. As he reminds us, ‘emotion can be coercive; which is why in the end it must answer to reason’ (2000, p. 53). Yet, his aesthetic distinction between ugly and positive rhetoric fails to provide a clear test to isolate negative speech because, as he admits itself, it can never be certain whether sectarian, violent or aggressive language eventually might lead to beneficial outcomes for deliberation. In the end, the effort to affirm some types of rhetoric over others merely exposes a prejudice that deliberation is, fundamentally, a rational process from which emotions can be eliminated. As with Young (who is, admittedly, much closer to Aristotle than is Dryzek), rhetoric’s primary virtue for deliberative democrats prepared to endorse it is, as one commentator puts it, ‘in prising open the doors of the deliberative forum and widening its agenda’ (Parkinson 2003, pp. 184–185). It gets people heard, it expands the democratic community and it broadens our appreciation of difference; but it should never replace reasoned debate.

The trouble with the overt anti-rhetorical dimension of deliberative democratic arguments, as Young herself acknowledged, is that it threatens to reduce democracy to an arid forum that makes unrealistic demands on how participants communicate and effectively excludes those who cannot comply with its strictures. By emphasising preconditions for legitimate speech, deliberative democrats, to varying degrees, remove communication from the world of disputation, passionate disagreement, intense attachments to principle and the weight of personal experience – all dimensions that contribute to regular kinds of argument and strategies of persuasion (see Olson 2011). Deliberation is thus imagined as a practice beyond the unevenness of power relations, a neutral and transparent space of encounters where the orderly temporal succession of argument, justification and eventual resolution are unforced by sensations of urgency, danger or risk.

In imagining democracy this way, deliberative democrats effectively suppress the political dimension of politics, that is, the contingent and fundamentally contestable nature of any decision or judgement and their grounding in contexts circumscribed by differential relations of power. Doubtless, this is connected to its overwhelming orientation towards achieving agreement or consensus (see Norval 2007, p. 26). Having accepted in advance how they might be persuaded on any matter, deliberating citizens are in principle far more likely to reach consensus. Yet, when its advocates do reintroduce ‘real world’ situations into the deliberative scenario – including contingencies such as sectoral interests, partisan loyalties, ‘situated’ knowledge and local forms of expression, compromises and intense disagreements – the normative foundations of deliberation appear rather unrealistic, perhaps even utopian.

The affective unconscious: neuroscience and psychoanalysis

For many – if not all – deliberative democrats, rhetoric and reason are pitted against each other as more or less opposites. Informing that contrast is a suspicion about the role of emotions in argumentative practices. But, as critics point out, even Aristotle did not object to the use of emotional appeals in his classic account of political deliberation (see Garsten 2006, pp. 135–139, 195–196). In legal disputes, where disinterested discussion of the facts was required, emotion may not be an
appropriate proof. But, for Aristotle, as Yack reminds us, political reasoning about the common good is ‘more like a contest for attention and allegiance’ than a forensic examination of truth claims (Yack 2006, p. 427). Such a contest concerns not simply how we form judgements but *that* we should make them at all. For Aristotle, it was never possible to make such judgements simply a matter of reason. ‘Decisions about future action’, continues Yack of the philosopher’s conception of politics, ‘draw on an inseparable mix of desire and intellect, emotion and reason’ (Ibid., p. 432).

Unlike Aristotle, however, contemporary theorists of democracy are less confident that their polities can ever be motivated by a substantial sense of the common good. Indeed, in the modern age, we have grown accustomed to suspecting the motives of others. Liberals, in particular, are prone to viewing claims to the common good as a guise for fanaticism, often of a ‘religious’ variety, where sentiments are mobilised in order to impose moral claims partial to one group or another. On what basis today, then, might emotions be reconnected to reason?

Below, I consider two contemporary approaches that insist on the inseparable nature of passions and the intellect: work inspired, respectively, by the fields of Neuroscience and Psychoanalysis. Although different and internally diverse, both fields examine unconscious, affective processes that support cognition. Such processes are deemed receptive to techniques of manipulation that activate memories and associations with varying intensity, consequently shaping our ‘attention and allegiance’ prior to reasoning. Emotions are perceived by advocates of these approaches to be at the heart of public deliberation and not a supplement or a distraction.

**Neuroscience**

Conventional conceptions are antagonistic to reason: feelings and passions entail bias, an unreflective attachment or allegiance towards certain objects or outcomes that overrides reason and threatens to subdue it; while reason, on the other hand, involves the dispassionate use of logical, repeatable procedures that do not favour any specific object or outcome. Emotion is partial and reason is impartial or ‘neutral’. Since Descartes, this conception is often accompanied by the association of emotion with unreasoned bodily instincts and thought with an independent domain of rational cognition.

Neuroscientists, however, see this separation of two domains as untenable. Emotions are not irrational reactions but material, physiological processes necessary to perception and the preparation of conscious thought. Emotions such as anger, fear, dread, joy and so on form the outward manifestation of deeper, complex and otherwise unconscious processes that are constantly receptive to environmental stimuli in the way cognitive processes cannot be. Laying down neural pathways and connecting different regions of the brain and body, emotions operate behind the scenes of the conscious mind to filter and evaluate perceptual information. ‘Emotion systems’ undertake specific tasks, monitoring and responding to sense experience prior to our conscious awareness and calling up appropriate dispositions in the form of sensations, such as ‘moods’ and feelings, before we actively deliberate (see Damasio 1994, 1999).

The implications of neuroscientific research for understanding political behaviour have been explored by a number of scholars in political and social
science. Drawing on Damasio’s notion of ‘somatic markers’, for example, Marcus (2002) has sketched the way different neural systems steady or provoke conscious reasoning. For example, our awareness of threats often arises before we have thought through a situation. Indeed, we ‘think through’ a situation only because our ‘fight/flight system’ alerts us in advance and generates sensations of imminent danger. Alternatively, the ‘disposition system’ monitors the success of our learned behaviours and alerts us with a sense of success or failure when certain parts of a procedure are executed or not. Finally, the ‘surveillance system’ is sensitive to the gap between our intentions and the actual performance of a procedure, reminding us with a sense of discomfort or surprise if something interrupts the action.

Far from intruding on reasoning, emotions describe a constant background activity that triggers the appropriate dispositions for reasoning. Thus, for Marcus, ‘Reason must rely on emotion’ because the latter taps into our procedural memories, supplying responses to situations, focusing us on what is required at any moment and initiating processes that take too long if left to the conscious mind. Emotion is, therefore, the foundation of reason, the support system that makes ‘strategic assessments’ of the context and disposes us towards actions accordingly (Marcus 2002, p. 76).

What implications does this view have for how we conceive of democratic deliberation? Marcus argues that far from disparaging the emotions, we should appreciate their role in political reasoning. He highlights two emotions in particular: ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘anxiety’. These serve to affirm or to stall habits, respectively, creating conditions for deliberation. Enthusiasm – a variable sense of well-being based on the successful accomplishment of habitual behaviour, registered in the disposition system – is required not only if we are to promote causes but also to recognise the successful exchange of views in dialogue (Ibid., p. 83). Without that emotion indicating success or failure, we would not recognise the accomplishment of persuasion. Democratic participation needs habitual forms of conduct whose performance must be constantly and efficiently monitored so that we know when to correct, repeat or revise our contribution and whether to reward others by affirming their success.

On the other hand, political engagement also prompts anxiety; that is, an emotional resource rooted in the surveillance system that halts our habitual behaviour and demands we think again. Anxiety interrupts habits and prompts us to explicitly ‘reason things through’. The painful or unpleasant sensation that things are not what they ought to be inhibits thoughtless custom, focusing consciousness on the fine details of an issue or activity so as to relearn our habits. For Marcus, anxiety is the foundation of cognitive reason because anxious citizens are those that set aside lazy assumptions in order to reconstruct argumentative positions and practical choices (Ibid., pp. 103–104). Reason arrives not because a neutral survey will allow facts to speak for themselves but because we are disposed (indeed, provoked) to revise our views: ‘Anxious voters are willing to be persuaded; they are willing to learn; they can and do change the outcomes of elections; they are willing to adopt new and untried alternatives rather than insist on habitual commitments. They fit the characteristics of traditionally conceived democratic citizens’ (Ibid., p. 106). His conclusion is rather striking: ‘If we want everyone to be rational, the seemingly effective solution is to make everyone anxious’ (Ibid., p. 108).

For Marcus, democratic politics is largely dominated by the contrasting emotions of enthusiasm and anxiety, of habitual practices and principles being
affirmed and habits being contested. Pleasure and pain intermingle, not as a
distraction from rational dialogue but as its very precondition. Emotion is triggered
not just at an explicit level – the naming of feelings by words – but also implicitly,
in the use of tone and style, and arguments that confirm certain outlooks, the uses
of metaphors and analogies that picture certain images for us. All these devices
assist in enveloping arguments emotionally, heightening levels of enthusiasm,
confirming our habitual understandings or (perhaps even at the same time) raising
anxieties by alerting us to their limits and shaking us from sedimented habits.
Similar conclusions are drawn by the cognitive psychologist, Lakoff, whose work
on metaphors in American politics draws attention to the ways electoral campaigns
involve competing ‘framing devices’ that activate deep-seated and largely
unconscious associations and values related to notions of family (Lakoff 2002,
2008, see also Westen 2007).

Marcus affirms the need for ‘political activists to create the circumstances that
invite the public to see and willingly reinterpret what it has seen many times in a
new way, with new eyes’ (Marcus 2002, p. 140) and that task he admits is one that
falls, at least in part, to practices of rhetoric (Ibid., p. 147). Only a lively, conflictual
public sphere, he concludes, where enthusiasms and anxieties are brought into play –
along with institutions that channel them effectively – can supply deliberation with
the energy to keep democracy working well. For him, ‘emotional politics is also a
rational politics’ (Ibid., p. 148). Likewise, Lakoff and Westen openly promote the
application of neuroscientific findings to generate effective democratic party
campaigns so as to match the powerful, emotive appeal of conservative ideology in
the USA. Creating convincing political arguments, they suggest, is primarily, if not
exclusively, about persuading by means of a positive emotional story.

Alternatively, the radical pluralist thinker, Connolly, explores how neuroscien-
tific research supports a democratic politics attuned to difference and creativity
rather than mainstream party politics (see Connolly 2002). Drawing upon
Nietzschean and Deleuzean philosophies, Connolly traces the affective dimension
of pre-conscious perception in order to foreground the possibility for alternative,
‘fugitive’ experiences that escape the coding inscribed in dominant cultural norms.
The receptivity of the affective unconscious to various techniques, prior to the
formation of judgement, opens the way to experimental forms of thinking that
enable memory and feeling to find new kinds of ‘composition’ that cannot be
grasped if we focus on language and cognition alone. Neuroscience, he argues,
brings to our attention the myriad, microscopic speeds and delays, hesitations and
hiccups, intensities and variations that underscore conscious thinking; it shows how
‘the composition of thinking and judgement is indissolubly bound to complex
relays between an intersubjective world and body/brain processes’ (Ibid., pp. 92–
93). Humans are embodied subjects but also diverse in their embodiments and
receptive to ‘experimental tactics of intervention’ (Ibid., p. 86). Such insights, he
argues, can support a radical pluralist politics of difference, transgression as well as
new kinds of solidarity.

Psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytical approach to emotions offers a less materialist outlook than that
of neuroscience, though the two are not incompatible. Both share the views that
reason and emotion are interlinked and that consciousness is shaped by processes
outside of its immediate purview. As a discipline, however, psychoanalysis tends less to causal processes (the micro-signals and triggers in the brain) and more to interpreting symptoms and their symbolic formation. It is, therefore, a ‘hermeneutic’ form of enquiry that explores how meanings are constructed and come to wield power within the psyche (see Craib 2001, pp. 9–10). For that reason, it, too, lends itself to a rhetorical approach to politics.

To be brief, psychoanalysis, founded by Freud and now with numerous and diverse schools of thought, argues that human psyches are constructed around an unconscious core of drives and repressed desires that persistently irrupt into consciousness. The formation of the Ego in human development typically entails subduing and disciplining those forces which for Freud were fundamentally sexual (or libidinal, stemming from the drives of the ‘libido’). Repressed forces are then experienced as intense feelings of, for example, anxiety, desire, anger, lust and attachment underlying our everyday behaviour. The cultivation of ‘civilised’ subjects able to communicate and cooperate in society requires that we control such feelings. But, they can never be wholly disciplined, regularly evade the defences of the Ego and rise to the surface, often with pathological consequences. For Freud, social and cultural phenomena, such as war and fanatical political movements, were evidence of how psychic instability operates in the social world (Freud 1991).

In this understanding of the psyche, reason and emotions are inseparable because the subject is constituted through its affective relation to other objects. In that respect, emotions are not purely physiological reactions; they frame the self as a coherent subject equipped with intentions and attitudes. Our emotional dispositions – the precarious balance of desire and self-control achieved to varying degrees – orient us towards the world and not only in reaction to it. As Cavell puts it, from a psychoanalytic perspective, emotions provide ‘framing attitudes’ or ‘background conditions for [...] our perceptual dispositions’, investing the world with a distinct tincture: ‘As orientations toward the world, emotions have intentionality. A feeling of melancholy, or joy, is about the world, the world conceived in a particular way, as empty, as full of promise, or as sad’ (Cavell 2006, p. 133). A ‘feeling toward’, she continues, is not something that can be simply ‘tacked on’ to a belief; it shapes the belief itself (Ibid., p. 136).

The advantage of psychoanalysis over neuroscience lies in the rich palette of socially operative emotional dispositions it describes. Anxiety, depression, paranoia, narcissism and so on comprise a variety of common affective states that psychoanalytical therapy diagnoses as unconscious forces shaping rational judgement. Moreover, the therapeutic dimension indicates that emotions are both communicable and revisable. For some, therapy itself is a form of persuasion open to the application of rhetorical techniques (see Frank and Frank 1991). Emotions are not just private and subjective but shape – and are shaped by – our social interactions and, via both therapy and in the course of life generally, can be transformed and channelled (Cavell 2006, pp. 134–136, see also Gross 2006). The self that is formed through its emotions can be reconstituted differently by giving shape to new channels for desire and identification.

Various contemporary political thinkers make use of psychoanalytical concepts to explore how public arguments are framed through emotional orientations. Butler, for example, has examined reactions to the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA by the conceptualisation of ‘mourning’ (Butler 2004). Butler draws on Freud’s claim in ‘mourning and melancholia’ (Freud 2005) that the process of mourning involves
grieving the loss of an attachment to someone or something. After a while, the pain of loss diminishes and feelings are directed to a new object. Yet, if that process is not successful, a melancholic disorder arises by which the subject cannot ‘let go’ of the image and seeks forcefully to maintain it.

For Butler, the loss for many in the USA after 9/11 (both personal and symbolic) played out as a public feeling that some lives were grievable and others not. That produced a ‘generalized melancholia’, that is a pathological mourning that lashed out aggressively at others (Ibid., p. 37). But, the government and media did not regard the losses of those hurt by American foreign policy as worthy of the same sense of grief. Indeed, in some instances, public grief for anyone other than American civilians and soldiers was tantamount to support for terrorism. Although, as she claims, ‘nations are not psyches’, disavowal and even prohibition of grief in that way entailed a collective subject being invoked to represent the nation:

In recent months, a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra legal subject, a violent and self-centred subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features ‘other’ to itself. (Ibid., p. 41)

What Butler describes is not a series of rational propositions isolated from emotions but an affective structure that defines an argumentative stance. Here, emotions shape the arguments, at least in so far as they validate specific objects and distribute recognition. Using a psychoanalytical framework, Butler explores an affective rhetorical strategy in which a collective self (the ‘nation’ in grief) is given form. This resembles Ahmed’s description – also ‘borrowing’ from Psychoanalysis – of the way emotions work socially, rather than privately, to create ‘surfaces of bodies and worlds’ by ‘sticking figures together’ and connecting the self to an imagined collective body (see Ahmed 2004).

These examples of psychoanalytical approaches to emotion explore the way public selves are constructed by channelling powerful psychic energies into identification and abjection. Importantly, the affective dispositions described are socially constructed, not merely instinctual processes. Practices of mourning or fantasising are fabricated ways of channelling feelings, calling up deep memories and reactivating traumatic experiences. To that extent, we might say they are rhetorically crafted: they are, in part, assembled by actors seeking to direct public discourse in particular ways by manipulating symbols for persuasive effect. But, that is not a rhetoric generated through reason alone, sometimes not through reason at all. Reason and emotions interweave in arguments that inscribe subjects in emotionally structured frames, invoking anxieties, resentments and pleasures in ways that rational discourse alone cannot.

The psychoanalytic approach presents a picture of emotional politics as unwieldy and always potentially violent. This contrasts with the picture presented by many influenced by Neuroscience, who tend to see a fit between emotional politics and established institutions and forms of leadership. For Marcus, these can prevent extreme emotions, such as ‘loathing’, from spiralling out of control and threatening the orderly regulation of democratic demands. For radical democrats
influenced often by psychoanalysis, however, such careful steering is neither likely nor entirely desirable.

Mouffe’s democratic theory, for example, explicitly builds upon a psychoanalytical conception of subjectivity (see Mouffe 2000). Not unlike Connolly, she underscores the possibility of a radical pluralism that emphasises diversity. For her, however, pluralism entails conflict: without the rationalist assumption that desire can be quelled in favour of reason, democracy opens up the prospect of ‘adversarial’ disputes among hostile, passionate differences of principle, rather than the fetishisation of consensus she detects in deliberative theories. For Mouffe, post-Lacanian psychoanalysis supports an ethics in which multiple and contrasting forms of affective identification are acknowledged as part of the democratic game but none can legitimately claim pre-eminence over all others (see Ibid., pp. 129–140). Democracy, in this vision, is a constant and ongoing contest to ‘hegemonise’ identities by recruiting them to different overarching projects. Such an ‘agonistic’ contest inevitably has rhetorical aspects, involving efforts to domesticate identities by arguing for ‘common sense’ principles.

Affective strategies and rhetorical democracy

What, then, do the insights of thinkers drawing upon neuroscience and psychoanalysis bring to our understanding of the relationship between rhetoric, emotions and power? I want to finish this article by suggesting that, despite their differences, the two approaches point us towards what I have called ‘affective rhetorical strategies’ in democratic politics. Far from being a pernicious force that blocks or interrupts the flow of transparent communication, emotions are productive of subjectivity, inciting citizens’ attention and allegiance to particular issues and ideals and, in so doing, shaping the spaces of democratic engagement. Although they locate them differently (in the brain and in the psycho-social world, respectively), for both emotions help *situate* subjects in relation to their world, orienting them towards its objects with degrees of proximity and urgency, sympathy and concern, aversion or hostility. These orientations are never fixed or complete but part of ongoing practices of contestation and negotiation whose point of mediation is often rhetorical dispute. However mainstream or ‘radical’ we prefer it to be, a rhetorical democracy – that is, a democracy inclined to endorse rhetorical engagement – is one that recognises and enhances the prospects for affective strategies to unfold.

As we saw earlier, deliberative democrats typically dispute the value of emotions because they are thought to disrupt the transparency of communicative exchanges, urging participants to adopt positions despite their rational judgement. That worry is not dissimilar to the hostility to Griffin’s television appearance noted in the introduction. In both, we find concerns over the neutrality of debating space being tarnished by unjustified or inflammatory arguments that mobilise harmful and disruptive feelings.

Yet, it is the very idea of a neutral space of dialogue that research into emotions and affects calls into question. Democratic encounters unfold at the intersection of numerous strategies and power relations, not outside them. Although they differ in important ways, neuroscience and psychoanalysis invite us to think of subjectivity in terms of complex networks of layers and circuits, with distinct temporal dynamics and patterns of articulation into which interventions are constantly being made. The focus of neuroscientific approaches to emotions is the circuits between the brain and the body, while psychoanalysis attends to emotional circuits connecting
the psyche to language and social relations. Each identifies distinct, affective processes that connect memories to cognition and charge conscious thought with associations and emotional density. In both approaches, emotions function more like movements behind and across consciousness, shaping the perceptual field, distributing degrees of intensity and ordering its orientations and cognitive responses to the wider world. Rather than spontaneously rational psyches interacting in neutral space, subjects are more like lost tourists trying to work out which way round the map should be, where abouts they are ‘on’ it and how they get to where they want to go. The space around them alters as they respond to different clues, revolving the map to place themselves where they think they might be. As they do, some landmarks get closer and more urgent, others further away. Persuasion, like a kindly intervention by a tour guide, acts upon this fragile (dis)orientation. Interestingly, both Connolly and Mouffe conceive such interventions as being akin more to ‘conversion’ – transformations that work on judgement affectively – than rational argument alone (Mouffe 2000, p. 102, Connolly 2002, pp. 44–45). We might improve on this by saying that conversion is the first step towards speaking (and listening) differently.

The spatial and temporal dimensions of subjectivity are important to understanding the political power of emotions. For subjectivity is not simply an interior state but, rather, its layers, speeds and connections persistently link to bodies within wider social and material contexts. The velocities and motions, directions and interconnections of selfhood mesh with and ricochet against the overlapping times and spaces of nature and society. Emotions are, therefore, physiological/psychic relays in the wider movement of affects, which can be viewed as ‘transindividual’ movements that disperse across the landscape of social relations. Thrift (2007, pp. 171–197) argues, for example, that cities have a distinctive character as sites of layered, sometimes clashing, affective networks where different subjectivities are calibrated and coordinated (e.g. sites of pleasure, work, rest, danger, and the flows between them). In this, urban spaces mirror what neuroscience and psychoanalysis, in their different ways, tell us about subjectivity. It also gives us a clue to how we might imagine democracy.

Rather than a negative force blocking free movement, emotions can be conceived as productive processes, supplying channels and connections for thought and experience that enable responses to the wider pressures of social space and time. Of course, that is not to say emotions cannot be manipulated or ‘get out of hand’, exceeding the situation and laying down traces that inhibit further, perhaps more effective, reorientation. Emotions are always doing this, for sure. But so, too, in its ways (e.g. bureaucracy), does reason. The problem here is not power but, as Foucault once argued, domination. Power, in his view, is coextensive with society and the ‘strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others’ (Foucault 1997, p. 298); there are no spaces of liberty outside such power relations. Domination occurs when the mobility of power is constrained, when further strategies to modify it are blocked (Ibid., p. 283). That distinction can help separate persuasion from insidious forms of manipulation such as propaganda or political marketing; but there is no absolute difference here. Persuasion offers us grounds to believe or act, although we may contest those grounds; propaganda disguises its own contestability (see Jowett and O’Donnell 2006). We might argue, then, that democratic encounters are constrained when affective strategies are locked in place, when it is barely possible to challenge emotional appeals or
recirculate feelings and further transform them. In such situations, it is difficult to think and feel otherwise, to resist the clamour for agreement, to invoke ambiguity and doubt over dominant emotions and the arguments they support, perhaps to take seriously what is otherwise treated with ridicule. The point is not to eradicate emotions but to work with them more inventively.

Instead of viewing democracy as a space from which emotions need to be evacuated, it may be better to think of it, too, as a network generated in and through affective rhetorical strategies that assemble and reshape communicative practices by working on popular attentions and allegiances. Those strategies, as we have seen, are deployed ‘to direct and control the conduct of others’ by mobilising metaphors and imagery, invoking memories and shaping perceptions or reactivating traumas and the promise of resolution. Whether we prefer a more rhetorically vibrant liberal democracy (as with Marcus or Lakoff), where existing parties confront each other more or less equally, or a radical democracy, where hostile differences may coexist and clash creatively (as with Connolly or Mouffe), we need to think of emotions as the forces that position subjects for such engagement. A rhetorical democracy, however, restricted or diverse, is one where feelings are brought to the fore, not held back, so that they are productively contested and challenged.

Conclusion

In a sense, the deliberative democrats are right. Rhetoric does entail the use of emotion and an exertion of power in democratic dialogue. But, this is not a reason to censure rhetoric so much as a clue to the way democracy actually works through relations of power and affect. As I have argued, the insights of neuroscience and psychoanalysis suggest that, contra rationalist aspirations, strategies of persuasion are both unavoidable and necessary when subjectivity is understood as an affectively charged network. The alternative to eradicating power and emotion from democratic discourse, then, is to do it better. That may mean a number of things: developing a greater awareness of the way rhetorical strategies work, of how specific spaces are organised affectively; formulating a vocabulary of affects that operate in public life, learning how to argue through emotions yet without the excess and intellectual silence that so often accompanies thoughtless outbursts; and developing affective strategies that support new and difficult encounters rather than relying on habit and custom. In short, it means constantly adapting democratic speech to the difficult task of negotiating feelings.

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