

A Democratic Ethos

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For Democracy, But Not As We Know It!

There seems to be two different ways of thinking “democracy”. On one hand, there is democracy that holds the promise of a more just and fairer future, that suggests people hold the power to determine their version of a liveable life. It is a democracy that enables vibrant debate and contestation, and where different worlds coexist. On the other hand, there is actually existing democracy, which Todd May sums up nicely. He states, from his position in the US, that “we in the US were told that our God-given mission was to bring democracy to places that lack it. This was especially true of those places that have a lot of oil” (May 2010:1). Here democracy is an elitist, paternalistic set of practices and institutions that maintain a more-than-liveable life for the few. It seems clear that in terms of the first way of thinking democracy, actually existing democracy in the so-called developed world, is not, for the most part, very “democratic”.

In 1991, Jean-Luc Nancy wrote of the

world at a moment when a kind of broadly pervasive democratic consensus seems to make us forget that “democracy”, more and more frequently serves only to assure a play of economic and technical forces that no politics today subject to any end other than that of its own expansion. (Nancy 1991:xxxvii)

In other words, actually existing democracy seems to only serve the expansion of economic and technical interests. More than 25 years later, similar arguments persist, framed as post-democracy (Crouch 2004), de-democratisation (Brown 2011), or depoliticisation (Bates et al. 2014; Flinders and Wood 2014). Post-politics has more recently described this closure as practices, strategies and norms that enable politics (discussion, debate, participation) but only in so far as it occurs within the narrow sphere of business-as-usual (Darling 2014; Swyngedouw 2011; Thomas 2017; Thomas and Bond 2016; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Dissent outside this sphere is quickly delegitimised through a variety of tactics and modalities (Bond et al. 2018; Darling 2014) that are themselves enabled through “democratic” processes like legislation debated in a house of representatives (e.g. that increasingly criminalises protest, or encourages a culture of surveillance). In addition, a pragmatic realism constructs subjectivities that are individually oriented and disciplined into the “commonsense” of business-as-usual, consolidating TINA (there is no alternative) discourses (see Bond et al. 2018). Alternatively, political subjectivities are so precariously situated in the struggles of everyday life as to be unable to enact a politics of dissent. The result is the sedimentation of a political

and social order that is so cramped it makes alternatives that envision a fairer, more equitable and more just existence seem impossible (The Free Association 2010).

The failures of democracy go well beyond post-political closure and depoliticisation tactics in the public sphere. The epistemological and ontological hegemony of western systems of democracy perpetuate historical inequalities and injustices that are too often invisible to those in dominant groups. Laura Pulido (2015: 813–814) defines the components of white supremacy through an example of a polluting industry near Los Angeles with a history of non-compliance. These components are *awareness* of the harm caused by their actions; *taking*, in this case clean air and wellbeing; and demonstrating “an attitude of *racial superiority*” (emphasis added). In calling this out as white supremacy, she names the structural racism that is embedded within democratic states. Here the rule of law, and the regulatory role of the State, has enabled such racism to continue, despite knowing the inequalities and harm it results in. Of course white supremacy is nothing new, but “racial capitalism” and the space to name racism has become less visible under neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism (Pulido 2015), and I suggest, its pragmatic realism oriented toward economic efficiencies and particular racialised forms of so-called common sense.

If democracy is such a failure, servicing only a minority, being enrolled in the service of power and capital—why hold on to it as an ideal? It might be argued that democracy has never worked to produce a fairer world. Indeed, when a Māori research participant once said to a colleague and I in an interview that democracy has not been very good to us (i.e. Māori), I questioned my own adherence to a concept that is colonial, clearly doesn’t work in practice, and moreover, has done and continues to do violence in perpetuating the status quo. So what does a decolonised, properly progressive ethos of democracy look like? Does it exist? Can it be facilitated such that an alternative democratic imaginary becomes possible?

Returning to the etymology of the word gives me cause for hope—*demos*, the people, and *kratos*, power—power to the people. But who are the people and to what ends do they seek and wield power? If a radical democratic ethos is the ability and right to speak out, is that sufficient to enable a democracy that addresses the inequalities that actually existing democracy perpetuates. Radical democrats like Mouffe, Rancière, Žižek, and Connolly argue in various ways for a vibrant contestatory public sphere. May (2010) highlights a key dimension of a radical democracy—the power to challenge, raise questions, and articulate alternative imaginaries. But what if these alternatives are unjust or perpetuate racist capitalism, or colonial relations of marginalisation and oppression? In many respects, this question reflects the challenge laid down by Olson and Sayer (2009) to be explicit about the normative basis of our work. We assume the orientation to justice is enough—but justice for whom? What are our normative foundations? Mouffe (2005, 2013) specifically addresses the normative question that underpins the inherent challenge to dominant practices that create or perpetuate inequalities. She argues for negotiated and situated articulations of justice, equality and liberty

as the ethico-political values that underpin the situated and sometimes contested notions of a democratic ethos in particular places.

Here, I am reminded of the work of radical geographers who identify, explore and privilege the efforts of people who seek a more just, fair world, who engage and perform a politics of dissent and contestation. The contours of what is deemed just, fair and equal are evident in both the challenges made to the status quo and the alternatives imagined. For example, the work of the Community Economies Collective initially led by Gibson-Graham and now continued by Kathy Gibson, Jenny Cameron, Steve Healey, Kelly Dombroski, Graddon Diprose and many others is “committed to theorizing, representing, and enacting new visions of economy”.¹ Pulido’s (2015) work, mentioned above, seeks to name and make visible the ways in which racism continues to underpin capitalism and the ongoing nature of the contemporary colonial project (Bonds and Inwood 2016; Daigle and Sundberg 2017; Radcliffe 2017; Sundberg 2014; Thomas 2015). Indigenous geographers call out epistemological and ontological violence within existing hegemonies of both the academy and within other purportedly democratic institutions (Coombes et al. 2013; Daigle 2016; Hunt 2014).

These examples (and there are many more that I should acknowledge but that I haven’t the space to mention here) demonstrate a democratic ethos whereby people are claiming space to live a more liveable life, and to challenge that which constrains or limits their ability to do so. These communities that radical geographers work with are typically the subjects of injustice, or seek to challenge and address injustices that harm others. Their work is underpinned by shared ethico-political principles that provide a situated but implicit normative basis around justice, equality, and a democratic space to speak. This is crucial work, highlighting the labour of groups and communities who seek to carve out spaces that once seemed impossible within the cramped contours of the current conjuncture (The Free Association 2010). Despite its significance, it seems that it highlights the work of those already enrolled in some kind of progressive democratic ethos. So how can we extend this work—or some might say scale it up (Gismondi et al. 2016)? How can we create the conditions of possibility to facilitate the spread of such a democratic ethos in those subjectivities who are so entangled within and often blind to the dominant rationalities that perpetuate harm?

I suggest that the vibrant, contestatory sphere that radical democrats argue for, while important, is insufficient to shift the epistemological and ontological hegemonies at work. While this work disrupts the order of the sensible, highlighting the contingency and cracks within these hegemonies, it seems to me that there is a need for a radical shift in political subjectivity away from individualised responsibility, blame, and liability to a more collective ethos of care and responsibility. Here I am referring to the work of Iris Marion Young in particular, but also Judith Butler and Joan Tronto, and the recent revival in radical geography of a feminist ethic of care (see, for example, Diprose 2017; Lawson 2007, 2009; Smith 2009; Williams 2017, among others). I suggest that such a care-full politics and a

political responsibility for justice (Young 2011) ought to be the (always situated) normative foundation or the ethico-political basis for a radical democracy.

There are different ways of framing a feminist ethic of care, but what resonates for me is the recognition of our vulnerability to others (human and non-human) for our very existence. From the moment of birth to our everyday relationships of love and nurture (see Butler 2006), we are relational beings. Yet the tendencies for dominant discourses to individualise responsibility and privilege market rationalities, don't only reduce the space for politics and contestation. They reduce the space for thinking and acting relationally and thereby also thinking and acting care-fully. As Lawson argues, "this marginalization of care is deeply political and it bolsters relations of gender/race/ethnic inequality and restricts human flourishing" (2009:210; see also Williams 2017). Consequently, Lawson argues for a critical ethic of care and responsibility where care is not private. Rather it "begins with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships" (2007:3).

In early work on a feminist ethic of care, Tronto argues for thinking through such an ethic as the foundation for political judgments. She seeks a shift in thinking from "seeing people as rational actors pursuing their own goals and maximising their interests, ... [to] instead see[ing] people as constantly enmeshed in relationships of care" (1995:142). There are parallels here with Iris Marion Young's (2011) articulation of responsibility for justice. The model of individual rational actors that Tronto refers to invokes a liability model of justice that seeks to lay blame on individuals. While there is still a role for this in some contexts, it tends to mask the structural inequalities that create injustices. Therefore, Young argues for a conceptualisation of justice that is cognisant of the way people, typically in positions of white privilege, are entangled in societal structures that cause injustices or harm to others. This entanglement means that individuals who benefit from these structures are complicit in the resulting harm and therefore have a degree of responsibility to act to address that injustice. However, she argues this action must be a collective action. The burden is too great to bear alone. Underlying these ideas is an ethic of care and responsibility, aligned with recognition of the violence and harm of the structures of contemporary global capitalism and ongoing colonialisms. This framing of a politics of justice is spatial, relational, and situated, and is attuned to structural violence.

Radical geography has, it seems to me, always highlighted struggles for justice and voice. But as Olson and Sayer (2009) suggested, it hasn't always been explicit about the normative positioning that underpins this work. A democratic ethos is already evident in much radical geography—one that is decolonising, keenly sensitive to structural injustices, and situated in a care-full politics for a liveable life. An ethos is always negotiated and situated, but it is also guided by ethico-political principles that are shared. Let's name them.

Endnote

¹ See <http://www.communityeconomies.org/about> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

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