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Political Emotions in the Classroom How Affective Citizenship Education Illuminates the Debate Between Agonists and Deliberators

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Abstract

This is a response to Ásgeir Tryggvason's argument that the deliberative critique of the agonistic approach to citizenship education is based on a misreading of the main concepts in agonistic theory—a misreading that has important implications for any attempt to bring closer agonism and deliberation in citizenship education. My aim in this response is to offer some clarifying comments and questions and suggest some further ideas for expanding Tryggvason's analysis, highlighting in particular two perspectives that, in my view, deserve further attention in citizenship education: first, the consequences of cultivating agonistic emotions in the classroom; and, second, the possibilities and limitations of acknowledging what has been called "affective citizenship" as an important element of citizenship education. My response concludes by discussing how affective citizenship education illuminates the debate between agonists and deliberators.

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TRYGGVASON'S (2018) PAPER came at a time when there is an increasing interest in citizenship education about the role affect and emotion play in discussing difficult and controversial issues in the classroom. The arguments for and against the place of emotions in citizenship education are not new, of course; they have been debated for some time. On one hand, there is the argument that emotions are central in an agonistic approach to citizenship education because emotions are considered an essential aspect of political and democratic life. On the other hand, the deliberative perspective—certainly not a monolithic one—puts emphasis on reason and rational argumentation; therefore, emotions are not trusted to have a legitimate place in political discussions in the classroom. In his paper, Tryggvason offered a compelling review and analysis of these arguments,

drawing on the differences and similarities between deliberative education and agonistic education. Tryggvason argued that agonism (which is often grounded in Mouffe's theory of agonistic

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pluralism) and deliberation (which includes a variety of perspectives that do not amount a single body of principles) are joint in the critique of essentialist identities and person-oriented emotions within education. However, Tryggvason wrote, an attempt “to assimilate agonism with deliberation in citizenship education cannot be successful if the notion of agonism stems from Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism [but rather] an assimilation of this kind would have to be based on other notions and definitions of agonism if it is successful” (p. 7). Tryggvason went on to suggest a “tamed version” (p. 7) of agonism as a link to deliberation.

Tryggvason’s (2018) analysis that the deliberative critique of the agonistic approach to citizenship education is based on a misreading of the main concepts in agonistic theory is extremely valuable, because this misreading has indeed important implications for any attempt to bring closer agonism and deliberation in citizenship education. My aim in this response is to offer some clarifying comments and questions and suggest some further ideas for expanding Tryggvason’s analysis, highlighting in particular two perspectives that, in my view, deserve further attention in considering citizenship education and agonism: first, the consequences of cultivating agonistic emotions in the classroom and, second, the possibilities and limitations of acknowledging what has been called *affective citizenship* (Fortier, 2010, 2016; Johnson, 2010; Mookherjee, 2005) as an important element of citizenship education (Zembylas, 2014, 2015), particularly in relation to how affective citizenship education illuminates the debate between agonists and deliberators.

Summary of the Original Argument

Tryggvason (2018) began his article by asking several questions, among which was what role students’ identities and emotions should play in political discussions in the classroom. To respond to this question, the paper examined two prominent approaches in citizenship education during the last two decades: deliberative education and agonistic education. As Tryggvason explained, the deliberative ideal and the agonistic ideal promote different views of classroom discussions. On one hand, the deliberative ideal emphasizes that conflict of opinions should be transcended, and thus, discussions should aim at cultivating rational deliberation and reaching some sort of consensus. On the other hand, the agonistic ideal emphasizes the political dimension of conflicts, which implies that conflicts between opinions cannot be reduced to rational deliberation but are unavoidably entangled with participants’ identities and emotions (Ruitenberg, 2009; Zembylas, 2014, 2015). Tryggvason focused on exploring the deliberative critique from the vantage point of agonism, rightly pointing out that as far as the assumptions made about identities and emotions, the deliberative critique of agonism is unfounded and based on a misreading of Mouffe’s agonistic theory.

To advance this position, the paper has four main parts. In the first part, Tryggvason (2018) discussed how deliberative education has generally handled emotions in classroom discussions, highlighting that deliberative approaches have underestimated the importance of emotions. At the same time, Tryggvason acknowledged that there are scholars in contemporary deliberative theory

who attempt to address this critique by acknowledging the importance of introducing controversial and emotionally charged topics into the classroom. In the second part of the paper, Tryggvason’s point of departure was Ruitenberg’s (2009) outline of an agonistic approach in which the role of political emotions is highlighted. Tryggvason identified that a central aspect of this approach—which is grounded in Mouffe’s (2005) theory of agonistic pluralism—is the destabilization of essentialist identities. This idea suggests that the agonistic approach recognizes the importance of sustaining the political in emotions, conflicts, and identities; it is, therefore, emphasized that there is no escape from political emotions in classroom discussions. Political emotions are generally understood as those emotions that are directed toward a societal object, such as homelessness, compared to moral emotions that are directed toward a personal or interpersonal object (Ruitenberg, 2009).

The third part of the paper took on the relation between identities and political issues. The deliberative perspective is concerned that conflicts can easily become clashes between individuals because the agonistic approach creates space for the different (e.g., ethnic) identities of the persons involved by allowing political emotions in a discussion. However, this claim, Tryggvason (2018) correctly pointed out, is grounded in the false assumption that there is a sharp distinction between identities and political issues, whereas it is not necessary that conflicts must stay framed in identity-based terms. In this manner, Tryggvason made an important point, namely, that the deliberative position rests on erroneous assumptions about the agonistic conception of identities, especially the claim that agonism emphasizes essentialist identities. As it was reiterated, understanding of identities and political issues within an agonistic frame does not have to be framed in essentialist terms (see Zembylas, 2011).

In the last part of the paper, Tryggvason (2018) argued that there is room for political emotions in the classroom, but this has to take place under certain conditions, namely, an agonistic understanding of emotions has to be compatible with the deliberative perspective. However, there are problems with assimilating agonism and deliberation because “the idea of agonism as a link to deliberation is not compatible with Mouffe’s theory of agonism” (p. 7). Therefore, there has to be, Tryggvason argued, a “tamed version” (p. 7) of agonism that recognizes deliberation as agonism (which is not antagonism). Yet it is clear that “educating students to become active democratic citizens could mean different things if the teacher takes an agonistic or a deliberative stance” (p. 8). Tryggvason emphasized the point that commitment in the deliberation process is not just a rational understanding but an emotional involvement—which is the agonistic approach’s position—yet the issue is not further developed. But why is this point so important, especially in citizenship education? Or, to put it differently, what are the consequences of cultivating agonistic emotions (e.g., commitment, hope, etc.) in political discussions in the classroom?

The Consequences of Cultivating Agonistic Emotions in the Classroom

At the heart of agonistic emotions is the idea that affect and emotion play an important role in nourishing the ethico-political principles that democracies are based on (Mihai, 2014). For example, an account of agonistic emotion that can sustain the political project of Mouffe's democratic theory emphasizes that democratic emotions are fundamental elements of agonistic democracies. For Mouffe, pluralist democracy is conceived in a way that does not deny the antagonistic dimension but rather turns antagonistic confrontations into agonistic ones (Mouffe, 2005, 2014). An agonistic relation is one that, while preserving the reality of conflict, puts limits on what political agents can do to each other (Mihai, 2014); in Mouffe's (2005) terms, opponents are adversaries rather than enemies. In his analysis of Mouffe's approach, Tryggvason pointed out that a form of citizenship education that embraces this agonistic approach would also embrace the role of political emotions. Tryggvason's analysis provides fertile ground for extending the debate between agonists and deliberators about political education. An interesting question emerging from Tryggvason's discussion is: What happens in citizenship education when educators and students adopt the emotions that Mouffe advocates?

Before responding to this question, it is important first to clarify how political emotions are understood in the original piece. In general, there are the following indications about emotions in Tryggvason's (2018, p. 6) analysis:

1. Emotions not only are person-oriented but have a social and political dimension (e.g., political hope, political resentment).
2. A strong rationalistic framework of emotions that makes a clear distinction between political and moral emotions is problematic.
3. A definition of political emotions that takes as its starting point the object toward which the emotion is directed is a problematic way of discerning whether it is a political emotion or not.
4. Emotions (e.g., in the classroom) can be made compatible (or not) with the ethico-political values of liberty and equality.

The above indications allude to what Mihai (2014)—whom Tryggvason cited several times throughout his essay—called a weak constructivist cognitivist approach, in reference to Mouffe's approach toward emotions. This approach is grounded in the following (certainly nonexhaustive list of) assumptions. The indications that roughly correspond to each follow:

1. Sociality, politics, and emotions are entangled; the conception of emotion and politics implied here seems to be that of a constructivist perspective (e.g., Kemper, 1990, 2006); namely, emotions become elaborated as social and political meanings in conditions of interaction and social organization (indications 1, 3).

2. Emotions are not irrational passions that “contaminate” reason; therefore, any distinctions that render emotions as less rational are problematic (Armon-Jones, 2003) (indication 2).
3. Emotions are similar to judgments in many ways because they express values and they reveal how we see the world (de Sousa, 1987; Solomon, 1988) (indication 4).
4. Emotions can be subjected to critical appraisal and evaluation, and therefore, it is possible to generate emotions that are compatible to certain values and judgments (Armon-Jones, 2003; Solomon, 1988) (indication 4).

Given the malleability of emotion assumed in the weak constructivist approach, “it is clear that emotions can and are meant to fulfill important functions in the reproduction of the collectivity, both in terms of limiting undesirable behavior and encouraging the wider endorsement of the values defining the group's identity” (Mihai, 2014, pp. 39–40); thus, it is suggested that emotions can be directed to “fit” with the ethico-political principles of a democratic society.

In light of these assumptions, especially in relation to the earlier question raised about the consequences of cultivating agonistic emotions in the classroom, there is an important insight emerging from Tryggvason's (2018) analysis that could further extend the discussion concerning the relevance of political emotions in the classroom. This insight is that, at the end of the day, all emotions are somehow politically relevant (Clarke, Hoggett, & Thompson, 2006; Demertzis, 2013); this idea implies that political emotions are unavoidably elements of citizenship education. This also means that beyond the deliberative or agonistic ideals in the classroom, political emotions are present in the classroom and thus have to be engaged pedagogically. Therefore, a critical conceptualization of the entanglement between political emotions and certain rules of pedagogical engagement in the classroom is necessary, if educators wish to confront the consequences of choosing to cultivate some political emotions (rather than others) without resorting to ideology or propaganda (see Zembylas, 2014, 2015).

The Contribution of Affective Citizenship in the Debate Between Agonists and Deliberators

The second perspective that I want to highlight in my response focuses on using affective citizenship education to propose a practical application that fuses agonistic and deliberative views. To do this, I discuss first how affective citizenship literature informs citizenship education and illuminates the debate between agonistic and deliberative views; then, I conclude by arguing that affective citizenship is an example of a fusion between agonism and deliberation.

In her seminal article on affective citizenship, Fortier (2010) used the term *governing through affect* to indicate the management of affect for the purpose of community cohesion, namely, how the state or other sites of disciplinary power (e.g., fellow citizens, social and political organizations) prescribe what it means to be a “good citizen.” Thus, there are certain affects, groups, and acts that are

treated as desirable or undesirable depending on their influence on cohesion (Fortier, 2010, p. 23). As Fortier (2010) explained: “The ‘affective subject’ becomes ‘affective citizen’ when its membership to the ‘community’ is contingent on personal feelings and acts that extend beyond the individual self [. . .] but which are also directed towards the community” (p. 22). In other words, membership to a community becomes contingent on whether subjects direct their feelings towards proper acts of citizenship. In her more recent work, Fortier (2016) used the term *acts of citizenship* to refer “to both institutional and individual practices of making citizens or citizenship, including practices that seek to redefine, decenter or even refuse citizenship” (p. 1039).

There are two important implications of using affective citizenship literature as a point of departure to propose that citizenship education ought to cultivate one kind of political emotion or another. The first implication is that affective citizenship literature relocates debates of citizenship education so that they explicitly recognize the web of practices that make acts of citizenship promoted in the classroom “visible, audible, tangible and knowable” (Mol, 2002, p. 33). This means, for example, paying careful attention to the elicitation, circulation, and distribution of certain emotions for and within a community in relation to the codes of conduct of the “good” or “bad” affective citizens (Fortier, 2016). The affective citizenship literature teaches those of us in citizenship education that the cultivation of political emotions is inextricably linked to the forms of disciplinary and biopolitical power constituted by certain educational policies and pedagogical practices, namely, how students and teachers variously experience, enact, interpret and feel these policies and practices. Fortier wrote:

Exploring affective citizenship requires focusing on its complex logic: how the feelings that attach to citizenship are unevenly distributed across gendered, racialized, sexualized, classed bodies—some citizens feel safer than others; some citizens are deemed safer than others—and, in turn, how subjects’ feelings about citizenship are not equally valued—not all desires for citizenship are deemed equally desirable. (2016, pp. 1041–1042)

This idea challenges educators in citizenship education to engage students in questioning how various actors are engaged together (e.g., deliberation) and in opposition to each other (e.g., agonism) with political issues that are inevitably affective (Di Gregorio & Merolli, 2016)—a learning process that might yield critical insights into how certain attachments to citizenship that are cultivated can facilitate but also erode emancipatory projects in citizenship education. This point brings me to the second implication I want to discuss here, namely, how affective citizenship may constitute an example of a fusion between agonism and deliberation.

Affective citizenship literature illuminates the debate between agonists and deliberators by highlighting that political discussions in the classroom are not only bound up within state or other disciplinary power relations but also (already) take place in the context of certain affective attachments (Fortier, 2016). For example, some feelings attach themselves to citizenship (e.g., belonging, pride, etc.); therefore, it is reasonable to assume that certain acts and practices in or beyond the classroom (e.g.,

inclusive or exclusive practices) can bring up such feelings (Ahmed, 2014). In the context of citizenship education, this idea implies that one needs to examine under which conditions cultivating acts of solidarity, empathy, belonging, and struggles for democratic freedom are relevant to citizenship: how ethically and politically appropriate is it to “manage” such affective acts in the classroom? Thus, encouraging students to deliberate or even engage in acts of citizenship that are more inclusive (e.g., welcoming refugees and migrants) and challenge normative rules of citizenship has important affective and political consequences that need to be acknowledged and critically explored in the classroom.

Acknowledging these issues in the context of efforts to assimilate agonism with deliberation in citizenship education can provide a basis for renewing debates on the role of political emotions in deliberative and/or agonistic education. Affective citizenship, then, constitutes an example that fuses deliberation and agonism, because it pays attention to both political emotions and the procedural framework through which diverse opinions are enabled within a deliberative space (e.g., in the classroom). Learning how to feel about citizenship, how to act and feel as citizens, including how to protest as citizens or against terms of citizenship that are exclusive to some people is “invariably bound up with what we know about citizenship and its (failed) promises, much of which is assumed and taken for granted” (Fortier, 2016, p. 1041). Hence, the pedagogical or philosophical approach used through which we learn about/from citizenship is inextricably linked to affective citizenship and its challenges.

The above discussion implies that educators in citizenship education need to cultivate pedagogical skills with which they can navigate the ethical, political, and emotional challenges of affective citizenship (Zembylas, 2014). Practically, this means that teachers might require, for example: to develop the capacity to expose and critique the entanglements of affective citizenship and political emotions in the classroom; to become capable to critically assess the politicization of affective citizenship and its various manifestations; and to be able to anticipate what might happen when certain political emotions are adopted and, most importantly, how affective attachments to certain bodies (e.g., fear, resentment) might change. Engaging with the pedagogical consequences of cultivating agonistic emotions or the deliberative principles for political discussions in the classroom goes beyond a simple opposition between agonism and deliberation. It requires critical insights and pedagogical skills into how affective attachments to various citizenship ideals can be navigated towards facilitating or crippling democratic and emancipatory ethos.

Concluding Remarks

Tryggvason (2018) reiterated that the form citizenship education should take to promote active democratic citizenship within the frames of deliberation and agonism is essentially an open question that needs to be further explored. In my response to Tryggvason’s essay, I have attempted to delineate merely two perspectives of this exploration that have to do with the relevance of political emotions and the use of affective citizenship as an

example of fusing deliberation and agonism. Enriching further the theoretical and empirical understandings of political emotions and affective citizenship in relation to agonism and deliberation requires asking critical questions about how the entanglement of power, politics and affect in citizenship education projects (deliberative and/or agonistic) can create openings for transformation or bring closures to emancipatory acts of citizenship. What a fusion of agonistic and deliberative perspectives offers through affective citizenship education is an open-ended democratic project with both challenges and possibilities. Perhaps the real strength of this fused account lies not in the form of any solution but rather in that it provides a different way of viewing and feeling exclusion, conflict and difference in learning from/about citizenship.

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