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Can Mindfulness really change the world? The political character of meditative practices

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness – the Buddhist derived meditative practice of cultivating attention to the present moment – has become a secular global phenomenon. Analysis of Mindfulness's *political* significance remains rare, despite its take-up by political actors and popular critiques of commodified, instrumentalised 'McMindfulness'. This article argues that Mindfulness exemplifies how technologies of the self occupy a key, contested space between reproducing and challenging contemporary power relations. Critiques of McMindfulness are extended via themes of de-politicization and the construction of neoliberal subjectivity. But more cognitively focused accounts of meditation practice, and wider critical-theoretical concepts, are then used to reconstruct Mindfulness, indicating its expansive political potential. 'Micro Mindfulness' is shown to enhance the neglected area of individual agency within deliberative democratic theory. Further, 'Macro Mindfulness' resonates with the radical democratic understanding of political subjectivity and 'democracy to come'. Most expansively, Mindfulness is a resource for developing critical consciousness and even prefiguring alternative futures.

Introduction

Secularized Mindfulness is a meditative practice – derived from Buddhism – concerned with cultivating attention to the present moment. Its extraordinary rise in Western contexts has been characterized as a 'Mindfulness Industrial Complex' (Ferguson 2016, 202). This began in clinical settings, and became a multi-million dollar presence on the global self-help market (Doran 2018; Garlick 2017). Mindfulness programmes have become widely institutionalized, including in workplaces, schools, public health, criminal rehabilitation, leadership training and even the military (Purser 2019; Walsh 2018). Mindfulness has entered the formal political sphere with, for example, a Mindfulness caucus in the US congress (Ryan 2012) and a Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group in the UK (MAPPG (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group) 2015; Cook 2016). The popularity of Mindfulness training for UK parliamentarians and staffers led to its extension and, in 2017, the UK Parliament hosted an 'International Mindfulness in Politics Day', with representation from 14 countries (Bristow 2019). Unsurprisingly,

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a backlash against Mindfulness's instrumentalisation, commodification (Arthington 2016) and deviation from its Buddhist origins (Ditrich 2016) has also taken hold, most notably under the banner of a critique of 'McMindfulness' (Purser and Loy 2013; Purser 2019).

Given this context, academic political and policy analysis of Mindfulness remains surprisingly rare. This article develops a political-sociological approach, arguing that secular Mindfulness exemplifies the contested character of widespread technologies of the self (Foucault 1982), and has considerable political potential. I begin by outlining key features of secular Mindfulness meditation practice and why it warrants greater social scientific attention. I then critically evaluate the ontological assumptions of the practice, as a basis for extending the McMindfulness critique of de-politicization and the construction of neoliberal subjectivity. Many critics argue that, to be uncoupled from neoliberalism and become a force for social and political progress, Mindfulness must be restored to a Buddhist ethical foundation (e.g. Hyland 2017; Purser and Loy 2013; Purser 2019). I adopt a more pragmatic perspective, arguing that while this is of course a legitimate strategy for a reconstruction, it is not the only one available. As part of this pragmatic approach, I draw on meditative practices which point the way to cultivating a more engaged and critical outlook than that implied by so-called McMindfulness. This enables a detailed analysis of Mindfulness's political and democratic potential, of interest across conflicting traditions that characterize critical policy studies. By engaging with deliberative democratic theory, I show how what I label 'micro Mindfulness' might strengthen the neglected area of *individual* deliberative agency, and the process of deliberation itself. I then go on to identify resonances between Mindfulness and radical democratic theory, notably its account of democracy to come and contingent political identities. On this basis, what I characterize as 'macro Mindfulness' is shown to offer a platform for social critique, activism and the prefiguration of alternative subjectivities and social relations.

Mindfulness and political analysis

'Mindfulness' is a translation from the Pali word *sati*. Scholars have debated the extent to which this translation should imply variants of 'memory' or 'attention' (Bodhi 2013; Gethin 2013), but it is the latter which has underpinned its secular development. The most widely drawn-on definition is that of Jon Kabat-Zinn, the leading figure in popularizing secular Mindfulness having translated it from Buddhism into Western clinical settings (Arthington 2016; Nehring and Frawley 2020). For Kabat-Zinn (1994, 4):

> Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present moment reality.

Mindfulness based on this understanding constitutes a widespread social practice and technology of the self (Foucault 1982): it has a relationship to both Buddhism and clinical applications, but is not wholly reducible to either (see Davies 2016, 259). This 'blending' and mass diffusion of Mindfulness has been systematically, historically mapped by Nehring and Frawley (2020). Basic Mindfulness techniques have proliferated well beyond Buddhist and clinical settings, and are routinely accessed by users including those who

neither identify as Buddhist nor as engaging in a clinical process. This occurs, for example, via a choice of over a thousand Mindfulness phone apps such as Headspace (Garlick 2017). A non-Buddhist/non-clinical orientation is also characteristic in the presentation of Mindfulness programmes in, for example, schools (Hyde and LaPrad 2015; Weare 2019), among legislators (Bristow 2019) or in workplaces.

The core Mindfulness techniques include paying attention to the breath; registering sensations in the body; listening to external and 'internal' sounds; and observing the flow of thoughts or emotions. Sometimes attention is focused on a specific activity, such as eating or walking. Whatever the mechanism, the cultivation of attention remains central (Kabat-Zinn 2004; Williams and Penman 2011). Mindfulness seeks to reacquaint us with our fundamental 'field of awareness': this typically sits in the background of our mental operations, while a constant stream of thoughts and feelings dominates our immediate attention. Awareness itself is non-reducible, but becoming alert to its presence enables us to hold in view the arbitrary nature of even our most entrenched thoughts and emotions (Williams and Penman 2011). More generally, 'discovering' the field of awareness is what first-time meditators sometimes report as a transformative experience (Burkeman 2012, ch., 5). When applied to everyday activities such as working or parenting, mindful self-monitoring enables a crucial pause before habitual, often conflict-generating behaviors kick in (e.g. Kabat-Zinn 2004, 248–73). More substantively, formal practice can be used to inculcate empathy and compassion. Thus, 'loving kindness' practice asks the meditator to extend unconditional goodwill to those ranging from loved ones to individuals we may dislike (Brach 2003, 278–82).

Attempts to 'scale-up' and embed Buddhist ethical precepts at the level of national constitutions and policy-making are well documented, for example in the case of Bhutan. In particular, its index of 'Gross National Happiness' caught the imagination of those critical of Western preoccupations with the narrow instrumentalism of GDP (Long 2019). However, the lack of academic discussion of secularized Western Mindfulness's political character is striking. For example, the founding editorial statement of the academic journal *Mindfulness* makes no reference to the sociological context or politics of the practice (Singh 2010). A handful of American commentaries since the 2000s have bucked this trend. These include the explicitly Buddhist collection *Mindful Politics* (McLeod 2006), and US Democrat Congressman Tim Ryan's (2012) *A Mindful Nation*, which argues for its benefits across policymaking. More recent, critical debates have opened out the political terrain (e.g. Purser, Forbes, and Burke 2016; Purser 2019), but not from within political science. A crucial exception was a symposium in *New Political Science*, which acknowledged that the discipline, 'has been virtually silent about mindfulness' (Ferguson 2016, 201) and that, 'the question of what political implications mindfulness may have is currently wide open' (Moore 2016, 278). In the UK, Cook (2016) offered an ethnography of the take-up of Mindfulness practice in Westminster, via the proceedings of the MAPPG, while Whitehead et al. (2016) reported on engaging civil servants in Mindfulness training.

There are compelling reasons to develop a fuller, political-sociological analysis of Mindfulness. Policy advocacy presents Mindfulness as a neutral tool for human well-being, with widespread applications (Bristow 2019). But it typically falls to social and political analysts to offer a more critical reading of such technocratic accounts – a central theme in critical policy studies (Braun 2016). More fundamentally, Mindfulness exists at

the leading edge of 'micro', 'DIY' or 'everyday' politics (Bang 2005; Leggett 2017, 70–96), in that it politicizes individual awareness itself: perhaps the last frontier in the politics of human subjectivity (Rose 2013). In particular, Mindfulness crystallizes the dilemma of whether we read individualized practices as integral to transformative social and political action, or as the model for neoliberal self-governance (McNay 2009; Salmenniemi 2019). My argument is that *both* tendencies hold, such that Mindfulness constitutes a key site of contestation with expansive political potential.

Extending the critique of 'McMindfulness'

The most generalized dismissals of Mindfulness echo criticisms of affluent, narcissistic countercultural politics since the 1960s (Lasch 1979). In policy, the use of Mindfulness is criticized as exemplifying the drift to targeting individual behaviors, rather than addressing their structural contexts (Nehring and Frawley 2020). But the most comprehensive critique has coalesced around 'McMindfulness'. Capturing Buddhist and secular unease with the instrumentalised, commodified character of the Mindfulness 'revolution', the term was popularized in a viral *Huffington Post* blog by Purser and Loy (2013), then extended in Purser's (2019) *McMindfulness*. For secular critical texts such as Davies's (2016) *The Happiness Industry*, or Cederström and Spicer (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*, Mindfulness and similar practices exemplify an 'inward turn', displacing critical thought. Such accounts offer important analyses of self-help in historical context, but do not engage the philosophy and practice of Mindfulness in detail. Below, I draw on key perspectives in political analysis to develop claims that McMindfulness is de-politicizing and pacifying, but also produces a particular neoliberal subject.

Mindful (un)awareness and de-politicization

Mindfulness instructs the meditator to observe thoughts, emotions and sensations as merely events (e.g. Williams and Penman 2011, 87–8), which we can hold in the field of awareness without getting 'lost in the story'. While potentially psychologically liberating, this is problematic in terms of the agent's critical capacities. Mental states are given a *sui generis* quality that is curiously both reductionist (they have a force of their own) and contingent (they simply come and go). What is missing is the possibility that bodily discomfort, emotional upset or intellectual confusion are rooted in objective social or physical circumstances. These limitations are scaled up in the description of life as an infinite flow of 'moment to moment' experience: this is central to learning to avoid rumination on the past (disappeared moments), or projection on to a (never arriving) future. The general trope of 'being in the moment' is, of course, ubiquitous in contemporary culture (e.g. Tolle 2020). While this is presented as empowering, Dunne (2013, 80) suggests that moment-centrism implies that, ' . . . thoughts about past and future cannot be about real things because neither the past nor the future truly exist except in our thoughts.' This negates the ambition of social and political critique to understand the origins of the present conjuncture, the individuals who inhabit it, and likely, desirable or even utopian futures. Extreme presentism is also not just atemporal, but asocial: experience is abstracted from the institutions, ideologies, social norms and relations that constitute an agent's 'present', and are the basis of critique (see also Walsh 2018).

These de-politicizing tendencies can even become embodied in Mindfulness practitioners who have political intent. Ferguson (2016) notes the risk of thinking, '"I need to fix myself before I fix the world" [and thus] permanently deferring political engagement.' Alternatively, one may come to, 'believe that mindfulness meditation is itself a political act: By sitting on the cushion, the meditator is bringing more peace to the world' (Ferguson 2016, 203–4). This, as Wallis (2016, 501) argues, neglects that, ' . . . the world remains unchanged. The only change that occurs is in the practitioner's perception.'

The negation of critical faculties culminates in so-called 'pure awareness': unmediated moment to moment experience of the world 'as it really is'. Guided practice often begins with a narrow focus on the breath, expanding through bodily sensations, thoughts and external sounds. The meditator is then encouraged to let go of such anchoring points, and access moment to moment experience in its entirety (Brach 2003, 326–8; Kabat-Zinn 2004, 74). However, returning to ontology and critical theory, 'pure awareness' not only militates against critique, but is *ontologically impossible* (see also Purser 2015). For example, the starting point of realism is that – notwithstanding an objective world – the filtering of perception through biology and subjectivity means there is no 'unmediated' experience (Sayer 2000). Constructivism makes the stronger claim that reality itself is built through the intersubjective agency of individuals (Burr 2003), while poststructuralist discourse theory foregrounds the constitutive role of discourse in what is held to be real (Torfing 1999). Despite their own fundamental disagreements, these perspectives all concur that *there is no such thing as 'pure experience'*. Further, to see the world 'as it really is' is not to hold up a mirror of uncontaminated agential appreciation, as in Mindfulness, but to understand causal mechanisms (realism); interpret the meaning-making activities of agents (constructivism); or to deconstruct contingent, unstable discursive structures (varieties of discourse theory). This is not to say that practitioners of Mindfulness may not subjectively experience something that feels approximate to 'pure awareness'. But there is little to anchor this in the ontologies of subject-object relations that inform social scientific observation and critique.

Mindful, neoliberal subjects

Mindfulness can also be critiqued as exemplifying a *productive* form of power, one that both constructs and disciplines neoliberal subjects (Wallis 2016). Foucault's account of advanced liberal government indicates how apparently autonomy-enhancing practices inculcate self-governance (Dean 2010, 192–200; McNay 2009). This can be illustrated with regard to Mindfulness and the Foucauldian tropes of expertise and surveillance. Foucault envisaged expertise as central to the mediation between rationalities of government and individual subjectivities. McMindfulness illustrates how, sure enough, self-help culture has been accompanied by an explosion of self-styled experts to enable individuals to improve their minds, bodies, relationships and careers (Cederström and Spicer 2015; Davies 2016). However, the simplicity of secular Mindfulness means that, once the basic toolkit has been internalized, both traditional and new forms of expert can be bypassed. Neither Buddhist teacher, nor self-help guru, are needed in order to simply pay attention to one's breath or emotional currents. This pares down Foucault's vision to its pure form, with implications for the related theme of surveillance. Foucault (1975) famously

illustrated how society's panoptic gaze inculcates self-regulation. However, in the panoptic society, self-regulation at least occurs with reference to the sense of an other (actors, institutions, social norms) who is watching. But, in Mindfulness practice, no one else is watching. Instead, constant mindful self-monitoring pushes Foucault's panoptic gaze to a still more insidious, individualized level (see also Arthington 2016).

More substantively, the subject at the heart of McMindfulness is the archetypal neoliberal worker and consumer. The Frankfurt School argued that mid-twentieth century capitalism was designed to distract and pacify consumer-citizens: on this view what we today refer to as societal 'attention deficit' actually reproduced the status quo (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). However, contemporary attention deficit presents a systemic threat to the neoliberal regime that engenders it: information saturation is damaging our capacities as producers (workers) and consumers (King 2016). Mindfulness – aimed at restoring individual equilibrium and attention – acts directly on this problem. This is one reason why Žižek (2001, 1) prophetically suggested that 'Western Buddhism' is, 'the perfect ideological supplement' to contemporary capitalism, given that:

> It enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that . . . what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you can always with-draw (sic) (Žižek 2001, 2).

This twin aspect – of participation and withdrawal – is evident in widespread workplace Mindfulness programmes. Here, Mindfulness is part of a 'workplace wellbeing' and 'resilience' agenda on the one hand, but also of self-optimization and productivity 'life hacks' on the other (see also Cederström and Spicer 2015, 22–5; Davies 2016, ch., 4). Crucially, this also reinforces our capacities in the complex consumer field, where concentration is similarly required to be successful (Bauman 2007). Attention-centered Mindfulness is thus a key technology for reproducing neoliberal capitalism but also – as I go on to show – a site of potential disruption.

From 'pure awareness' to critical reflection

The critique of McMindfulness is compelling. However, there have been gestures toward reframing Mindfulness as socially embedded and having political potential. As with the McMindfulness thesis, these are led by those who self-identify as Buddhists and/or are sympathetic to calls to 'restore' Mindfulness to its Buddhist foundations (Ng 2016; Purser 2019; Walsh 2016, 2018). It is beyond the scope of this article to engage doctrinal debates internal to Buddhism: these have evolved over many centuries, are geographically, culturally and intellectually diverse and internally contested (Ditrich 2016; McMahan 2008). However, scholars of Buddhism have usefully characterized longstanding technical debates over meditative practice as a resource for assessing secularized Mindfulness. Of particular relevance to political analysis is the status granted to conceptual reflection upon self and external world. While such work takes great care to draw out nuances, historical unevenness and internal tensions (see esp. Dunne 2015), an important dichotomy emerges between what are characterized as 'constructionist' and 'innateist' tendencies with regard to meditative practice (Dunne 2013, 2015; King 2016).

Innateism understands the purpose of meditation as being to uncover a basic ('innate') essence of non-duality between subject and object (Olendzki 2013). Indeed, more radical innateism seeks to dismantle not just the subject-object relation, but the distorting cognitive apparatus of the mind *per se*, foreshadowing the ethos of 'letting go' often found in secular Mindfulness (Dunne 2013). Innateism can be contrasted with approaches which emphasize that the Enlightened subject needs to be *actively constructed*. This requires the capacity to draw on the ethical apparatus of Buddhism, and make this manifest in meditation practice (Bodhi 2013). Such application includes use of intention (objectives of the practice); memory (ethical precepts, practice instructions); cognitive steering (direction and focus of the practice); and evaluation (Dreyfus 2013). Thus, far from seeking to dismantle all subject-object dualities – including the cognitive structures of the mind – constructionism seeks to *enhance reflection upon them*. King (2016) notes how this latter tendency was significant for what came to be known as (socially) Engaged Buddhism, including the addition of geopolitical and socio-economic analysis and critique (see also Queen 2003; Yarnall 2003).

These technical issues are significant for assessing the political potential of Mindfulness. Earlier I highlighted the problematic notion of 'pure awareness'; a failure to recognize social and political context; and deferral of political action in favor of self-development. But the more cognitively engaged, constructivist approach to meditation addresses these objections. By allowing subject-object dualism, the subject can be located in a definite, external context of social relations. More politically significant is the emphasis on the relationship between the subject's cognitive apparatus and external, *ideational* structures. Obviously this was intended to enable engagement with Buddhist doctrine, and lends itself to 'right mindfulness', imbuing the practice with Buddhist ethical imperatives (Bodhi 2013, 31). However, this ideational, cognitive space could equally be occupied by reflective engagement with secular social norms, political ethics or ideology (King 2016; Whitehead et al. 2016). Moreover, understanding the practice as evaluative enables a role not just for memory (of, for example, instruction or doctrine), but also the potential *visualization of desired states* – personal or societal – that are so important for mobilizing political action (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 190).

For Olendzki (2013, 57), constructionism also foregrounds meditation's self-developmental qualities: 'The centrality of this [space for] ethical evaluation reveals the extent to which this entire system . . . is meant as a tool for effecting personal psychological transformation . . . ' But again, I suggest the identities cultivated need not be Buddhist: they could be environmentalist, liberal or socialist (or, for that matter, conservative or etho-nationalist) – or none of these things. The point is that this challenges critiques which read Mindfulness – and technologies of the self more widely – predominantly in terms of disciplinary self-surveillance and self-regulation. Instead, we move on to the creative terrain of the ethics and care of the self, explored by Foucault (1984) for their potential in cultivating alternative identities and relations (McNay 2009; Ng 2016), and which are explored below.

Reconstructing Mindfulness

This section offers a political reconstruction of Mindfulness, detailing its applicability to both the 'deliberative' and 'radical' democratic traditions that sit in creative tension in

critical policy studies. I begin by highlighting deliberative theory's neglect of *individual* democratic agency, and how what I label 'micro Mindfulness' might address three key deliberative challenges: the engendering of democratic traits such as openness and acceptance; the dilemma of interests and representation in deliberative processes; and the contentious reason/emotion dichotomy. This is a valuable contribution to deliberative theory – or any analysis of civic participation – in its own right. On its own, though, it would likely disappoint radical democrats who – often in self-conscious opposition to deliberative democracy (Mouffe 2000) – subscribe to agonistic models of the political which foreground conflict. It would also fail to link theory, activism and societal transformation. However, I go on to indicate how 'macro Mindfulness' can address this more expansive agenda, demonstrating Mindfulness's wide-ranging political potential.

Micro Mindfulness: enhancing deliberative agency

Deliberative democracy, 'affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives', through a reason-giving process which envisages, 'autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society' (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 3). Given this mission, the under-theorization of the *individual* democratic agent in deliberative research is striking. Summarizing the achievements of the deliberative project, Curato et al. (2017) make no reference to democratic agency as a settled part of this contribution. Indeed, the so-called 'systemic turn' has scaled-up accounts of deliberative democracy and, 'risks losing sight of the important connection between deliberative agency and autonomy [to the extent that] the deliberative engagement of citizens is no longer a central concern' (Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018, 636). There is a neglect or dismissal of the notion that working on one's own mental and emotional condition might be an element of successful deliberative practice. Curato et al. (2017) do note, for example, the significance of developing a 'deliberative stance' among participants – but this is something which develops in *group* settings (such as 'mini publics') prior to formal deliberative processes. As Stoker, Hay, and Barr (2016, 18) conclude, 'socially mediated yet individual deliberation is … insufficiently explored in contemporary political science'. The most notable exception is Goodin's (2003) *Reflective Democracy*. Goodin highlights neglect of the agential, 'input' side of democratic theory, particularly the, 'important cognitive processes that precede and shape' acts such as deliberation and voting (2003, 11). He argues that, 'What is required is a new way of conceptualizing democratic deliberation – as something which occurs internally, within each individual's head, and not exclusively or even primarily in an interpersonal setting' (2003, 7). In what follows, Goodin's account is taken as seminal but incomplete: like others, it still misses a *prior*, more fundamental stage of individual development. Mindfulness has resources for addressing this, and related dilemmas in deliberative theory.

At a threshold level, the simplicity of the basic Mindfulness 'toolkit' (e.g. awareness of breathing or sounds) makes it more accessible than the potentially exclusionary bar of 'reasonableness' in deliberative theory. More substantively, Mindfulness can develop agential traits that enhance deliberative practices. Deliberative theorists gesture toward the importance of such dispositions, but not how they might be delivered. The traits typically identified are an attitude of openness; recognition and respect of Other actors

and points of view (Bohman 1997, 328); and the acceptance of differences that arise (Lupia and Norton 2017, 75). These underpin what Curato *et al* (2017, 32) identify as a, 'metaconsensus, which involves mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the different values, preferences, judgments, and discourses held by other participants.' However, the assumption again is that such dispositions are collectively cultivated and that, 'Scaling these effects up to the wider deliberative system requires careful attention to *institutional* settings' (Curato et al. 2017, 30, emphasis added). The prior work that participants might do on themselves, alone, is an overlooked yet crucial supplement. Cultivating openness and the acceptance of difference is central to Mindfulness practice, and there is growing evidence of its efficacy. Psychologists Baumgartner and Morgan (2019) examined individuals with competing moral worldviews. They tested for the effects of 'mindful' and 'mindless' states, using a basic 15 minute meditation versus taking cognitively depleting attention tests. Their finding was that, 'A brief induction of mindfulness facilitated a more neutral, equanimous stance toward morally dissimilar others ... whereas a brief induction of mindlessness facilitated greater intolerance'. This complements, for example, Congressman Tim Ryan's (2012) arguments about the potential of Mindfulness to overcome political polarization in policymaking.

Mindful traits can meet a further challenge in deliberative theory: how to achieve impartiality amidst a plurality of social interests. Gargarella (1998) foresaw this problem for deliberation, noting that, 'impartiality requires us to treat others' preferences as if they were ours [and yet we find it difficult] putting ourselves in another's place.' His proposal is for full *representation* in deliberative processes, obviating the need to 'get inside' others' heads. However, in an important endnote, Gargarella (1998, 275, n.7) concedes that it is not, 'impossible to achieve impartiality through individual reflection.' Goodin (2003, 228) develops this theme at length, recognizing that in deliberative exchanges much work, 'is done inside your own head, imaginatively projecting yourself into [another's] place.' Consequently, what he calls 'democratic deliberation within':

> ... asks each of us to internalize the perspective of each (prototypical) other. It asks each of us to look at the situation from all those various perspectives, and to come to a judgment as to what is best from all those perspectives.

Goodin (2003, 189) makes the ambitious claim that through such internalization, agents might ultimately, 'be able to "see" the situation from those many different perspectives at once without any conscious effort [such that] applying them is "second nature" to us.' On the related issue of representation, Goodin argues his approach can also accommodate 'mute' absent interests, including those of future generations, and is therefore key to addressing long-term issues such as climate change. These claims are strikingly similar to those made for acquiring multi-perspectival vision through meditation. Describing advanced stages of Buddhist meditative training, Ray (2006, 73) notes how one learns to, 'open one's awareness fully, so that it becomes an impartial and all-inclusive mirror in which all situations are reflected at once.' While the difficulties Western cultures have with the Buddhist objective of 'no self' are well documented (Lee 2015), its salience in terms of thinking about interests and representation is thought-provoking. Describing how the Buddha's practice led him to a new form of politics, Ray (2006, 65) suggests that, 'Having realized the illusory nature of his "self", *there was no person on his side for him to favor ...* For him, there could be no question of

advancing one group against another, he engaged in activities to further the goals of all beings, without exception or discrimination [emphasis added]'.

Goodin's *Reflective Democracy*, and advanced meditation objectives, thus share a commitment to achieving an open, multi-perspectival viewpoint. When it comes to the mechanics of acquiring such vision, Mindfulness can be seen as a valuable enhancement to what Goodin (2003, 4) identifies as, 'cultural aids in informing the democratic imagination'. Goodin (2003, 231) endorses the practical democratic potential of art, film and literature as they, 'manage to stretch us, giving us practice at putting ourselves in place of others.' This is undeniably true but misses a prior stage of the disposition, or mode of cognition, an individual brings to such objects. Goodin (2003, 190) himself recognizes that the artifacts required to really evoke social complexity could be demanding or even distressing for the individual (e.g. images of suffering or violence). But engaging such objects with *equanimity* is a key objective of Mindfulness practice, which routinely invites the subject to focus attention on their own 'difficult' emotions and responses (Brach 2003; Williams and Penman 2011). To take two extreme examples, a famous ancient Vajrayana practice involves the contemplation of decaying corpses, while secularized Mindfulness has infamously been deployed in 'under fire' battlefield training (Walsh 2018). These indicate the facility of the practice for engaging with distressing objects and emotions, turning them into objects of *contemplation*, thus buttressing Goodin's account of cultural aids.

Mindfulness offers a suggestive response to a further democratic challenge: the problematic distinction between 'reason' and 'emotion'. Deliberative theory's marginalization of affect and emotion has long been criticized (e.g. Mouffe 2005), although it has more recently sought to address this deficit (Lupia and Norton 2017, 73). The reason-emotion relation has attracted renewed focus owing to post-truth, anti-rational politics and the emotively charged tenor of contemporary public discourse. Stoker, Hay, and Barr (2016) frame such concerns in the context of the 'fast and slow' thinking associated with behavioral economics and psychology (Kahneman 2011). 'Fast' denotes the intuitive, often emotion-led responses we make most of the time, while 'Slow' refers to the more deliberative, evaluative mode. Stoker et al's empirical research suggests that Fast thinking tends to confirm political prejudices and result in cynicism. By contrast, Slow thinking leads to more considered engagement, reflection and the revision of opinions. Like Goodin, Stoker et al indicate the significance of individual reflection amidst deliberative processes. But they also illustrate the entrenched dominance of Fast thinking, and the sustained effort it takes to move into Slow mode and remain there. I suggest that Mindful awareness can enable this difficult, sustained shift between cognitive systems. We have seen that, in Mindful ontology, the field of awareness can hold both thoughts and emotions in view. This potentially transcends the Fast/Slow thinking dichotomy, which can itself become the object of contemplation. As Litfin (2018, 3) notes, in advocating contemplative techniques for political science education: 'The mind's ability to adopt a meta-position relative to its own contents, thereby consciously integrating somatic, emotional and mental experience, has profound implications for learning.' One such implication is the hope that those mindfully engaged in democratic deliberations and policy-making will exhibit calm, focus and a holistic appraisal of evidence: a central ambition in Mindful initiatives among legislators (Bristow 2019; MAPPG (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group) 2015; Ryan 2012).

Macro Mindfulness: radical democracy, personal and social transformation

There are unarguably benefits to enhancing the deliberative quality and tone of decision-making among elected representatives and other political actors (Cook 2016). But if this was the political extent of the practice, it would remain subject to the McMindfulness charge of being merely executive therapy, patching up systemic dysfunction. However, the expansive political potential of Mindfulness is indicated by the ways it also resonates with self-styled radical – or agonistic – theories of democracy and political participation. Often presented in terms of its friction with the deliberative tradition, radical democracy understands political subjectivity itself as inherently open-ended and contested (Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016). Similarly, the 'rules' of the democratic game are seen as the site of hegemonic political practices, necessarily linked to wider political projects. As such, the conflictual character of the political is foregrounded (Mouffe 2000, 2005). I argue that Mindfulness can shed further light on these elements in four key areas: its resonance with the idea of democracy as always in process and 'to come'; its radically deconstructed understanding of the subject and political agency; its account of the interface between personal and social transformation – crucially allowing for conflict; and its related potential for prefiguring alternative futures.

A key feature of radical democracy in relation to Mindfulness is its understanding of 'democracy to come'. This non-teleological conception envisages the democratic imaginary as always in process, contested and never to be resolved (Norval 2004). Unlike in deliberative models, the frontiers of 'democracy' itself are permanently contested and part of the hegemonic game, and this contestation is at the heart of democratic practice (Mouffe 2000, 2005). Central to such practice is an openness to the event and the contingent. Norval's (2004, 2007) work exemplifies how there is considerable effort in radical democratic theory to understand the ontological basis and consequences of this condition, but less on how to actually live it. However, resonant insights are offered by analyses of how meditation can cultivate critical awareness. Thus, Hyde and LaPrad (2015, 3–4) summarize the civic benefits of Mindfulness in schools by arguing:

> Democracy requires constant deliberation across difference without end, without ultimate resolution; it is always unfinished. Likewise, Mindfulness supports a process-oriented, rather than an ends-oriented, way of being.

More specifically, Mindfulness practice is, of course, predicated on receptivity to the unfolding moment – directly analogous to the 'event' highlighted by Norval (2004). Chödrön (2006, 143), discussing the cultivation of patience through meditation, describes, 'learning to sit still with the edginess of [our] energy', by which means, 'we learn something very interesting: there is no resolution.'

The second area where Mindfulness might complement radical democracy concerns the nature of subjectivity itself. Whereas in deliberative models the ontological integrity of the agent is given, in radical democratic theory, including Norval's account of democracy to come, the agent him/herself is predicated on a non-essentialist, unfixed account of identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). At a minimum, Mindfulness operates to de-stabilize the fixed concept of the agent per se. This has its origins in the Buddhist account of 'no-self', which strongly resonates with post-structuralist understandings of subjectivity and, crucially, their political implications (see Long 2019, 9–12). There are similarities between deliberative and

radical democratic accounts of agency with respect to cultivating 'openness'. We saw how this was evident in Goodin, and it is articulated more strongly by radical pluralists such as Connolly (1991). However, the key supplement in radical democracy is that such openness also invites *reappraisal of one's own subjectivity and identity* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105). The democratic implications of this theme are more fully developed in Norval's (2007) account of *Aversive Democracy*. Invoking Stanley Cavell, Norval argues that *challenging our own habits* is intimately linked to the wider health of democracy. For Norval this entails the construction of an 'aversive', oppositional identity, predicated upon a restlessness or dissatisfaction with our own selves and our environment. In this context, Norval (2007, 175) identifies the importance of, 'individuals having an ethic, a striving to better themselves, and so society, by overcoming habit'. Such 'overcoming habit' is a key feature of Mindfulness practice – what Williams and Penman (2011, 67) call 'waking up to the autopilot'.

Seeing the contingent, processual character of both self and democracy opens out a third area of resonance between Mindfulness and radical democracy: the strategic relationship between 'inner' and 'outer worlds' – or between the personal and the social/political. The capacity of Mindfulness to transmute 'emotion' and 'reason' into objects of contemplation, discussed above, creates cognitive spaces for different perspectives, or imagining alternatives. This echoes the frequent claims of individual meditators, and finds empirical support in, for example, Whitehead et al's (2016, 558) review of a civil servant Mindfulness programme, which found that:

> the non-judgemental aspects of mindful awareness open up an interesting space (or pause) before the onset of analytical interpretation, within which it may be possible to notice (and experience) potentially overlooked (or unfelt) aspects of a situation.

The researchers found that their civil servants, having learned to 'pause', began to focus on the broader political and structural conditions of their working environment. This reflects Lee's (2015) observations on how secularized spiritual practices enable a 'vertical' connection to a sense of something beyond one's particular interests, as well as forging concrete 'horizontal' relations with others. Contra arguments that Mindfulness represents an anti-sociological, 'psychological imagination' (Nehring and Frawley 2020), these claims indicate the potential of Mindfulness to open up awareness of both the system (structural, institutional elements), and social (agential, group relations) wings of the classic sociological imagination (Lockwood 1964).

Such awareness of one's operating environment provides a platform for more proactive forms of political critique. Indeed, Buddhism's account of meditation's role at the interface between personal and social transformation, via its conception of 'skillful means' (Gross 2006), captures something of this dynamic. Santorelli (2013, 209) argues that for meditators, the space for agency emerges precisely through, 'the friction arising out of inner practice *meeting* the outward circumstances of our lives.' The political potential of meditation, and in particular the Mindfulness trope of 'acceptance' – which can be confused with passivity (Brach 2003, 40–41) – lies in its capacity to *clearly read* this environment. Without the distorting noise of ego and the chatter of immediate thoughts and emotions, agents are better able to appraise their context and assess if, when and how to submit or intervene accordingly. Thus, Gimian (2006, 246–7) identifies, 'a creative tension, holding open the space between one's vision and the reality of a situation until a resolution arises from the ever-shifting ground.' Highlighting further resonance with the radical democratic tradition, this account

notably echoes Gramsci's (1971, 172) strategic reflections on the nature of 'effective reality' as a, 'relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium'. For Gramsci, the task of the 'active politician' was to, 'move on the terrain of effective reality [in order to] dominate and transcend it (or contribute to this)'.

On this reading, it should also be clear that the conflict and contestation foregrounded in radical democracy is not simply wished away by Mindfulness. Rather, Mindfulness offers a way for conflict to be held more clearly and strategically in view, so that it might be *responded to not reacted to*. For example, discussing the relationship between her meditation practice and feminist activism, Gross (2006, 231) notes that over time what 'vanished' was not her passionate commitment to the cause but, 'my rage, leaving the clarity of what I had already seen much sharper and more vivid.' This also offers a useful supplement to radical democratic theory in terms of the operation of 'us and them' boundaries – or political enemies. In Mouffe's (2000, 2005) work in particular, the inevitable drawing of 'us and them' frontiers has an atavistic quality: 'It is not in our power to eliminate conflicts and escape our human condition' (Mouffe 2005, 130). What Mindfulness offers is not a pretense that enmity does not exist but rather a way, as Jones (2006, 167) observes, 'to start to see more clearly the overall situation in which the mutual enmity occurs', as a means to engage more effectively in the political field. Indeed, this mind-set could be seen as supporting Mouffe's (2000, 2005) objective of converting antagonistic 'enemies' into more peaceable, agonistic 'adversaries'.

This platform for effective engagement takes us to the most expansive understanding of Mindfulness's political potential, in terms of social movement activism and prefiguration. At a practical level, it has specific applications in terms of protecting and equipping citizens and activists. For example, there is increasing recognition of how Mindfulness can help navigate the 'attention economy', including if, when and how to interact with a fractious social media (Bristow 2019, 89–90). There is also a tradition of deploying meditative practices in social movements, and today there are explicit attempts to build activism around Mindfulness and other contemplative practices (Salmenniemi 2019). These include, for example, the group activities of Occupy (Rowe 2016) or, more recently, Extinction Rebellion workshops on 'de-escalation' and sustaining nonviolent protest (Monbiot 2019). Seeking long-term cultural or systemic change can be demoralizing: but a Mindfulness perspective is reported as mitigating the psychological effects of setbacks, marginalization and loss of purpose (Gross 2006). Meditation practice can also enable activists to reflexively monitor their own conduct and political development. Rowe (2016) describes activists learning not to react in nonviolent protest; and working on their own experiences of oppression and how not to reproduce them.

Mindfulness reaches its most ambitious political phase when oriented toward alternative, prefigurative social relations. There has been a recent renewal of interest in the theory and practice of prefiguration (Swain 2019). Rowe (2016) characterizes Mindful prefiguration as helping, 'individuals and organizations discern their 'current shape' as a precondition to embodying their 'intentional shape'. More recently, in a discussion of the embodied and relational elements of meditation practice, Chari (2016, 240) also invokes prefiguration by arguing that such mindful embodiment, 'allows us to see these practices, not as instrumental to some purportedly more real politics, but rather, on the contrary, the very substance of forms of relationality that are yet to come.' She further outlines (2016, 238–9) how practices of spiritual embodiment resonated with the nonhierarchical, networked character of the

Occupy movement (see also Hyde and LaPrad 2015). In particular, such practices dovetail with the political strategy of 'holding space': creating the environment for fresh identities, ideas and strategies to emerge, rather than issuing specific demands (see Žižek 2011).

Mindfulness practices – embedded in shared social relations and projects – thus have potential to meet a key challenge for contemporary political participation and political theory: the tension between increasingly individualized, micro practices of selfhood, and collective democratic projects (see e.g. Salmenniemi 2019). For example, McNay (2009, 67–8) ultimately rejects the democratic, counter-hegemonic potential of Foucault's later work on the care of the self, for its inability to be, 'mediated into more durable and directed practices so as to constitute part of a concerted "struggle" against neoliberal governance.' However, the model of mindful, prefigurative holding space identified here enables not just personal capacity building, but also a calm and focused setting for *collective* demands to emerge. When allied to prefigurative political engagement, individual Mindfulness practice has potential to be scaled all the way up to generating visions of social transformation.

Conclusion

Such is the ubiquity of secularized Mindfulness that it is already 'changing the world'. My concern has been what this reveals about the political character, and socially transformative potential, of such a widespread practice of the self. I began by extending the important critique of instrumentalized McMindfulness, drawing on key perspectives in political analysis to assess the detail of Mindfulness practices. The primacy given to 'the moment' was shown to be de-politicizing: negating the idea of a critical agent able to locate themselves in historical and social context. Mindfulness has further been complicit in constructing neoliberal subjectivities. I argued that alleged benefits of Mindfulness – such as enhanced attention, productivity and resilience – are functional for a technologically mediated capitalism prone to induce their opposites.

Critics of McMindfulness typically seek a restoration of the practice to its Buddhist context. However I have treated Buddhism more pragmatically, as one among a plurality of resources to enable a political reconstruction. I highlighted approaches to meditation which place greater emphasis on agential cognition, intention and social context. This opened the door to a productive encounter with both deliberative and radical democratic theory, indicating Mindfulness's potentially widespread analytic and political appeal. I argued first that 'micro Mindfulness' attends to the neglected area of individual deliberative agency. Specifically, Mindfulness was shown to potentially cultivate democratic dispositions; to offer a novel, multi-perspectival means of rethinking interests and representation; and even to reframe the problematic reason/emotion dichotomy. A more expansive 'macro Mindfulness' was then explored beyond formal democratic decision-making, indicating Mindfulness's interest to radical democratic theory. I detailed Mindfulness's resonance with the contingent character of 'democracy to come', as well as open-ended political identities. Skillfully working on the relationship between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds was then shown to be a platform for strategically understanding individual action in structural context: a basis for effective engagement with a conflict-ridden political field. The latter includes emotional, practical and critical resources for citizens and activists. Most expansively, 'holding space' is a means for the prefiguration of alternative subjectivities and visions of social transformation.

Mindfulness's wide-ranging political potential brings to mind what Connolly (2013, 10) notes as the 'difficult combination' required of a contemporary progressive sensibility. This necessitates that we *slow down* – to recognize the existential threats posed by intensifying neoliberal relations and practices – and yet simultaneously *speed up* to develop a vibrant, urgent, 'more militant democratic politics'. Mindfulness's utility in areas ranging from individual deliberative reflection ('slowing down'), up to radical democratic subjectivity, social movement activism, critique and prefiguration ('speeding up'), seem well placed to address this daunting challenge. Secularized Mindfulness is sufficiently established to remain a fixture of contemporary societies, and similar technologies of the self will continue to proliferate. What I have shown is how such practices do not just reproduce dominant power relations, but *simultaneously* have potential to disrupt and transform them.

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Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

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