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Deliberativist responses to activist challenges

A continuation of Young's dialectic

Abstract   In a recent article, Iris Marion Young raises several challenges to deliberative democracy on behalf of political activists. In this paper, the author defends a version of deliberative democracy against the activist challenges raised by Young and devises challenges to activism on behalf of the deliberative democrat.

Key words   activism · deliberative democracy · Discourse · Ideology · public sphere · I. M. Young

In a series of influential articles and a recent book, Iris Marion Young has criticized dominant models of deliberative democracy for promoting excessively constricting conceptions of political deliberation.[1] In place of such narrowly 'deliberative' models of democracy, she promotes a 'communicative' theory of democracy (1996: 120; 2000: 40). Unlike its deliberativist counterparts, Young's communicative model does not privilege dispassionate argument and cold 'reasonableness' (2000: 38–9),[2] does not require that consensus upon a unified 'common good' be the aim of public discussion (2000, 40–4),[3] and does not presuppose a norm of discursive orderliness as a condition for inclusion in political discussion (2000: 47ff.).[4] Instead, Young's communicative view acknowledges forms of political communication that include, in addition to argument, rhetoric, greeting, and storytelling (1996: 129; 2000: 53ff.).[5] Moreover, the communicative model recognizes that under contemporary conditions of pluralism, 'serious and open public dialogue is more likely . . . to reveal differences than a common good' (2000: 44).[6] Lastly, Young challenges the 'identification of reasonable open public discussion with polite, orderly, dispassionate, gentlemanly argument' (2000: 49), and

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advocates the inclusion of 'disruptive, annoying, or distracting' (ibid.) communicative acts within the democratic process.

In the most general terms, then, Young's project can be seen as driven by a concern with the inclusion of voices, concerns, ideas, and problems that are otherwise in danger of exclusion.[7] Thus her communicative view should be seen as a more thoroughgoing application of the ideal of deliberative democracy. That is to say, Young shares with mainstream deliberativism a series of criticisms directed against traditional aggregative models of democracy (2000: 19–20; 1996: 119–122);[8] she also accepts the fundamental deliberativist idea that 'democracy should be conceived and as far as possible institutionalized as a process of discussion, debate, and criticism that aims to solve collective problems' (1997: 400).[9] However, she contends that this insight must be understood as also involving a 'principle of inclusion' (1999: 152) which requires not only that citizens collectively deliberate, but that those deliberations are inclusive of 'all interests, opinions, and perspectives present within the polity' (1999: 154). Young hence promotes a 'thick' conception of inclusion according to which

> Inclusion ought not to mean simply the formal and abstract equality of all members of the polity as citizens. It means explicitly acknowledging social differentiations and divisions and encouraging differently situated groups to give voice to their needs, interests, and perspectives . . . (2000: 119)

Any call for greater inclusion in deliberative democratic processes must address questions concerning the *extent* of the inclusion. The issue is not simply that of the extent to which a democratic polity must actively seek the deliberative input of those committed to morally reprehensible views, though this is, to be sure, an important issue. The call for inclusion also engages questions of the proper response of deliberative democrats to those who *reject* the deliberative ideal itself. This issue is especially poignant in the case of Young's model because her mechanisms of inclusion are directed towards expanding the democratic conversation by extending access to those who might be otherwise shut out due to their inability to satisfy the tacit norms of reasonableness, articulateness, and orderliness typically presumed by theorists of deliberative democracy. Here the issue is not that of expanding our conceptions of deliberation so as to include those who want to join the discussion, but cannot; rather it is that of dealing with those for whom the deliberative ideal itself seems silly, futile, or foolish.

In her essay 'Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy' (2003), Young addresses this issue by means of a staged dialectical exchange between two imagined characters: a deliberative democrat and a political activist.[10] Noting that they offer opposed substantive ideals of democratic citizenship (104), Young develops activist responses to two deliberativist

criticisms of the activist view of citizenship and then poses four activist challenges to deliberativism. One of Young's objectives is to dampen the optimism of deliberative democrats by raising activist challenges she thinks the deliberativist cannot adequately meet. Her aim is to 'sound a caution about trying to put ideals of deliberative democracy into practice in societies with structural inequalities' (103). As it is likely that all existing democracies can be plausibly described as suffering from structural inequalities of some kind, this is an unhappy conclusion for the deliberativist. Insofar as deliberativists take themselves to be offering a reformist program to ameliorate existing democratic practice, Young's claim that deliberative ideals are inappropriate for actual conditions is beyond unhappy, it is positively grim.

Accordingly, Young's dialectic between the deliberativist and the activist is of crucial import to the theorist of deliberative democracy, and the challenges she poses need to be addressed. I shall argue in this article that the rejoinders Young develops on behalf of the activist to deliberativist criticisms of activism are insufficient, and that the deliberativist can muster stronger responses to activist challenges to deliberative democracy than those suggested by Young.[11] My aspiration, then, is not to resolve the tension between activism and deliberativism, but to bolster the position of the deliberative democrat in the dialectic to which Young has called our attention; in this way, the tension between the two visions of democratic citizenship is punctuated and thus more thoroughly problematized for *both* the deliberativist *and* the activist. Hence my arguments constitute a call not simply for caution among deliberative democrats, but for *further* critical engagement between deliberativists and activists. Along the way, I hope to underscore elements of the deliberative democrat's position that are insufficiently theorized in Young's presentation.

Before turning to the arguments, it will help to review briefly the point of contention between activists and deliberativists as construed by Young. It is important to begin with the observation that deliberative democrats and political activists share common goals. They both aim to promote justice and to cultivate a more engaged and participatory mode of democratic politics. They diverge on the issue of means.

The deliberativist maintains that the most appropriate means for greater justice and more genuine democracy is the cultivation of 'sites and processes of deliberation' by which citizens who disagree can publicly engage each other's reasons, arguments, and ideas regarding shared political problems (104). Deliberative institutions and processes that aim to involve all citizens in public debate are more likely than their aggregative and 'adversarial' (Mansbridge, 1980) alternatives to 'arrive at policy conclusions freely acceptable by all' (104), and hence are more apt to promote justice. The deliberative democrat thus endorses a

particular vision of proper democratic citizenship according to which a deliberative citizen should seek by means of reasoned discussion to *persuade* those with whom she disagrees that their views are mistaken; accordingly, the deliberativist holds that citizens should seek out those with whom they disagree and rationally engage their arguments in an open forum.

Maintaining that 'the normal workings' of our 'social, economic, and political institutions' serve to 'enact or reproduce deep wrongs', Young's activist sees the 'ordinary rules and practices' that govern societal institutions as bound to perpetuate injustice. He[12] concludes that one cannot redress social injustice while working within those rules and practices (104). Thus he advocates action designed to disrupt the political status quo. Such action aims to express the activist's outrage and indignation at what he sees as persistent injustice; through such expressive acts, he hopes both to call the attention of his fellow citizens to the injustice and to motivate others to act similarly. On the activist view, then, proper democratic citizenship requires direct action in response to injustice. Such action often consists in strategies designed to publicize the injustice, such as picketing, leafleting, and demonstrating (105); however, when the injustice is severe, citizenship may require obstructive activity such as blocking entrances to buildings, 'throwing stink bombs,' and similar tactics (ibid.).[13]

That the deliberativist and the activist offer opposed visions of responsible democratic citizenship is clear. Indeed, even on the basis of the brief sketch I have provided, it is easy to anticipate the criticisms that are likely to be raised on both sides. The deliberativist contends that the activist's call to confrontation is dangerously unreasonable, whereas the activist holds that the deliberativist's exhortations to rational discussion are naïve. The arguments are of course more nuanced than this, so it is to these that we now turn. In what follows, I mirror the dialectical progression presented in Young's essay – we shall begin by responding to the activist rejoinders to two deliberativist criticisms, and then develop responses to the four activist challenges to deliberativism.

Deliberativist critiques of activism

Young considers two deliberativist criticisms of political activism. On the one hand, deliberativists accuse activists of adopting the kind of 'pressure group interest based politics' (106) that deliberativists cite as a prime obstacle to proper democracy. On the other hand, deliberativists charge activists with unreasonableness. Reasonable modes of political action, the deliberativist contends, consist in 'willingness to listen to

those whom one believes are wrong, to demand reasons from them and to give arguments oneself aimed at persuading them to change their views' (106–7). Note that this pair of criticisms derives from the two components of deliberative democracy outlined above: the deliberativist rejects aggregative or adversarial models of democracy and adopts a model of reasoned discourse as the proper means to achieving political justice.

Taking the criticisms in turn, Young's activist replies that activism is not an instantiation of the kind of adversarial interest-driven 'power politics' that the deliberativist derides. This is so, the activist maintains, because the activist 'is committed to a universalist rather than a partisan cause'; activism is not directed by self- or group-interest, but is rather aimed at the 'redressing of harm and injustice' (107).

To the charge that he is unreasonable, the activist responds that the deliberative democrat 'relies on far too narrow an understanding' of reasonableness (107). According to the activist, reasonableness extends beyond 'orderly reason-giving'; properly construed, reasonableness consists in 'having a sense of a range of alternatives in belief and action, and engaging in considered judgment in deciding among them' and being 'able and willing to justify' one's 'claims and actions to others' (ibid.). Young claims that there is nothing in the activist's mode of political action that is inconsistent with reasonableness in this sense; therefore activism as such is not unreasonable.[14]

Although Young treats these replies as adequate, they are not. The activist has misunderstood the deliberative democrat's criticisms, and so his replies to them cut little ice. Consider first the activist's expansion of what he takes to be the 'far too narrow' conception of reasonableness countenanced by the deliberativist. There is nothing in the proposed expansion that the deliberative democrat cannot hold, and in fact many deliberativists characterize deliberation in precisely these terms. Nonetheless, the deliberativist conception of reasonableness differs from the activist's in at least one crucial respect. On the deliberativist view, a necessary condition for reasonableness is the willingness not only to offer justifications for one's own views and actions, but also to *listen* to criticisms, objections, and the justificatory reasons that can be given in favor of alternative proposals.

In light of this further stipulation, we may say that, on the deliberative democrat's view, reasonable citizens are *responsive* to reasons, their views are 'reason tracking'. Reasonableness, then, entails an acknowledgement on the part of the citizen that her current views are possibly mistaken, incomplete, and in need of revision. Reasonableness is hence a two-way street: the reasonable citizen is able and willing to offer justifications for her views and actions, *but is also* prepared to consider alternate views, respond to criticism, answer objections, and,

if necessary, revise or abandon her views. In short, reasonable citizens do not only believe and act for reasons, they aspire to believe and act according to the *best* reasons; consequently, they recognize their own fallibility in weighing reasons and hence engage in public deliberation in part for the sake of *improving* their views.[15] 'Reasonableness' as the deliberative democrat understands it is constituted by a willingness to participate in an ongoing public discussion that inevitably involves processes of self-examination by which one at various moments *rethinks* and *revises* one's views in light of encounters with new arguments and new considerations offered by one's fellow deliberators. Hence Gutmann and Thompson write:

> Citizens who owe one another justifications for the laws that they seek to impose must take seriously the reasons their opponents give. Taking seriously the reasons one's opponents give means that, at least for a certain range of views that one opposes, one must acknowledge the possibility that an opposing view may be shown to be correct in the future. This acknowledgement has implications not only for the way they regard their own views. It imposes an obligation to continue to test their own views, seeking forums in which the views can be challenged, and keeping open the possibility of their revision or even rejection.[16] (2000: 172)

That Young's activist is not reasonable in this sense is clear from the ways in which he characterizes his activism. He claims that 'Activities of protest, boycott, and disruption are more appropriate means for getting citizens to think seriously about what until then they have found normal and acceptable' (106); activist tactics are employed for the sake of 'bringing attention' to injustice and making 'a wider public aware of institutional wrongs' (107). These characterizations suggest the presumption that questions of justice are essentially settled; the activist takes himself to *know* what justice is and what its implementation requires. He also believes he knows that those who oppose him are either the power-hungry beneficiaries of the unjust status quo or the inattentive and unaware masses who do not 'think seriously' about the injustice of the institutions that govern their lives and so unwittingly accept them. Hence his political activity is aimed exclusively at enlisting other citizens in support of the cause to which he is tenaciously committed.

The activist implicitly holds that there could be no reasoned objection to his views concerning justice, and no good reason to endorse those institutions he deems unjust. The activist presumes to know that no deliberative encounter could lead him to reconsider his position or adopt a different method of social action; he 'declines' to 'engage persons he disagrees with' (107) in discourse because he has judged on a priori grounds that all opponents are either pathetically benighted or balefully corrupt. When one holds one's view as the only responsible or just

option, there is no need for reasoning with those who disagree, and hence no need to be reasonable.

According to the deliberativist, *this* is the respect in which the activist is unreasonable. The deliberativist recognizes that questions of justice are difficult and complex. This is the case not only because justice is a notoriously tricky philosophical concept, but also because, even supposing we had a philosophically sound theory of justice, questions of implementation are especially thorny. Accordingly, political philosophers, social scientists, economists, and legal theorists continue to work on these questions. In light of much of this literature, it is difficult to maintain the level of epistemic confidence in one's own views that the activist seems to muster; thus the deliberativist sees the activist's confidence as evidence of a lack of honest engagement with the issues. A possible outcome of the kind of encounter the activist 'declines' (107) is the realization that the activist's image of himself as a 'David to the Goliath of power wielded by the state and corporate actors' (106) is naïve. That is, the deliberativist comes to see, through processes of public deliberation, that there are often good arguments to be found on all sides of an important social issue; reasonableness hence demands that one must *especially* engage the reasons of those with whom one most vehemently disagrees and be ready to revise one's own views if necessary. Insofar as the activist holds a view of justice that he is unwilling to put to the test of public criticism, he is unreasonable. Furthermore, insofar as the activist's conception commits him to the view that there could be no rational opposition to his views, he is literally *unable* to be reasonable. Hence the deliberative democrat concludes that activism, as presented by Young's activist, is an unreasonable model of political engagement.

The dialogical conception of reasonableness adopted by the deliberativist also provides a response to the activist's reply to the charge that he is engaged in interest group or adversarial politics. Recall that the activist denied this charge on the grounds that activism is aimed not at private or individual interests, but at the universal good of justice. But this reply also misses the force of the posed objection. On the deliberativist view, the problem with interest-based politics does not derive simply from the *source* (self or group), *scope* (particular or universal), or *quality* (admirable or deplorable) of the interest, but with the concept of interests as such. Not unlike 'preferences', 'interests' typically function in democratic theory as fixed dispositions that are non-cognitive and hence unresponsive to reasons. Insofar as the activist sees his view of justice as 'given' and not open to rational scrutiny, he is engaged in the kind of adversarial politics the deliberativist rejects.

The argument thus far might appear to turn exclusively upon different conceptions of what reasonableness entails. The deliberativist view

I have sketched holds that reasonableness involves some degree of what we may call *epistemic modesty*. On this view, the reasonable citizen seeks to have her beliefs reflect the best available reasons, and so she enters into public discourse as a way of testing her views against the objections and questions of those who disagree; hence she implicitly holds that her present view is open to reasonable critique and that others who hold opposing views may be able to offer justifications for their views that are at least as strong as her reasons for her own. Thus any mode of politics that presumes that discourse is extraneous to questions of justice and justification is unreasonable. The activist sees no reason to accept this. Reasonableness for the activist consists in the ability to act on reasons that upon due reflection seem adequate to underwrite action; discussion with those who disagree need not be involved. According to the activist, there are certain cases in which he does in fact know the truth about what justice requires and in which there is no room for reasoned objection. Under such conditions, the deliberativist's demand for discussion can only obstruct justice; it is therefore irrational.

It may seem that we have reached an impasse. However, there is a further line of criticism that the activist must face. To the activist's view that at least in certain situations he may reasonably decline to engage with persons he disagrees with (107), the deliberative democrat can raise the phenomenon that Cass Sunstein has called 'group polarization' (Sunstein, 2003; 2001a: ch. 3; 2001b: ch. 1). To explain: consider that political activists cannot eschew deliberation altogether; they often engage in rallies, demonstrations, teach-ins, workshops, and other activities in which they are called to make public the case for their views. Activists also must engage in deliberation among themselves when deciding strategy. Political movements must be *organized*, hence those involved must decide upon targets, methods, and tactics; they must also decide upon the content of their pamphlets and the precise messages they most wish to convey to the press. Often the audience in both of these deliberative contexts will be a self-selected and sympathetic group of like-minded activists.

Group polarization is a well-documented phenomenon that has 'been found all over the world and in many diverse tasks'; it means that 'members of a deliberating group predictably move towards a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' predeliberation tendencies' (Sunstein, 2003: 81–2). Importantly, in groups that 'engage in repeated discussions' over time, the polarization is even more pronounced (2003: 86). Hence discussion in a small but devoted activist enclave that meets regularly to strategize and protest 'should produce a situation in which individuals hold positions more extreme than those of any individual member before the series of deliberations began' (ibid.).[17]

The fact of group polarization is relevant to our discussion because the activist has proposed that he may reasonably decline to engage in discussion with those with whom he disagrees in cases in which the requirements of justice are so clear that he can be confident that he has the truth. Group polarization suggests that deliberatively confronting those with whom we disagree is essential *even when we have the truth*. For even if we have the truth, if we do not engage opposing views, but instead deliberate only with those with whom we agree, our view will shift progressively to a more extreme point, and thus we *lose* the truth. In order to avoid polarization, deliberation must take place within heterogeneous 'argument pools' (Sunstein, 2003: 93). This of course does not mean that there should be no groups devoted to the achievement of some common political goal; it rather suggests that engagement with those with whom one disagrees is essential to the proper pursuit of justice. Insofar as the activist denies this, he is unreasonable.

These arguments demonstrate that the deliberativist's criticisms of activism are more subtle and powerful than Young has supposed. The two quick replies Young puts in the mouth of her activist are inadequate as they stand. However, the deliberativist cannot let the matter rest here; the view of reasonableness sketched above bids the deliberativist to consider the activist's challenges to deliberative democracy.

Activist critiques of deliberativism

Young's activist brings four arguments against the deliberative program. As Young believes that the first two of these can be answered easily by the deliberativist, we shall deal with them quickly, and then move on to the more difficult considerations Young's activist raises.

The first two challenges are focused on the failure of existing political institutions and processes to satisfy the ideals of publicity, accountability, and inclusion (109) that are promoted by the deliberative democrat. First, the activist points to the exclusionary character of existing sites of deliberation, citing the prevalence of structural inequality and power (108). Second, he criticizes recent measures aimed at inclusion for falling 'far short of providing opportunities for real voice for those less privileged in the social structures' (112).

Insofar as the activist's criticisms are aimed at the failure of existing institutions to live up to the deliberative ideal, they implicitly accept that ideal. Thus, as Young points out, the deliberativist can agree with the activist that current conditions fall short of the democratic ideal, and can accept the activist's specific criticisms of the existing order (112). Again, they differ on the issue of means, not ends: the deliberativist holds that processes of continuing public discourse can reveal and

remedy the shortcomings of existing institutions and practices whereas the activist doubts that rational discussion can persuade powerful social agents to adopt a more inclusive and democratic mode of politics (112). The deliberativist may further argue that even if the activist's suspicions regarding the efficacy of political deliberation are granted, these suspicions are not in themselves sufficient grounds for rejecting deliberative democracy. Though not ideal, deliberation may still be the best option available for democracy.

Therefore the activist must formulate a deeper kind of critique, one that calls into question the consistency of deliberativism with its stated goals. Here is where Young's activist launches criticisms that seem to bite. The activist raises two objections that aim to establish that the political program endorsed by the deliberativist actually serves to perpetuate existing obstacles to inclusion and justice. I shall first pose the two activist criticisms and then fashion a deliberativist reply. Again we shall see that the deliberativist position is richer than the activist has supposed.

The activist's first serious challenge focuses upon the economic and social conditions under which even the most inclusive public deliberation occurs; according to the activist, 'existing social and economic structures have set unacceptable constraints on the terms of deliberation and its agenda' (113). That is, the activist contends that

> Going to the table to meet with representatives of those interests typically served by existing institutional relations, to discuss how to deal most justly with issues that presuppose those institutional relations, gives both those institutions and deliberative process too much legitimacy. It coopts the energy of citizens committed to justice, leaving little time for mobilizing people to bash the institutional constraints and decision-making process from the outside. (113)

The charge here is that political deliberation, even when conducted according to proper norms of inclusiveness, accountability, and publicity, always takes place within certain institutional contexts that are encumbered by 'a given history and sedimentation of unjust structural inequality' that 'helps set agenda priorities and constrains the alternatives political actors may consider' (113). Thus, the deliberativist's exhortation to reasoned discussion among those who disagree may in certain situations in fact serve to perpetuate the kind of injustice it claims to counteract. Therefore, the objection runs, it is not simply that the deliberative democrat recommends inefficient means to a more just and inclusive democratic politics, she actually endorses a program that implicitly accepts existing institutional arrangements and hence perpetuates the most pernicious kinds of exclusion and injustice.

The activist's second challenge alleges not only that deliberation must occur within institutional contexts that are already encumbered

by practices of exclusion, but that discourse *itself* may be exclusive. That is, the activist maintains that discussion is always conducted within a 'system of stories and expert knowledge' that conveys 'the widely accepted generalizations about how the society operates' (116). Explaining further, he contends:

> In a society with longstanding and multiple structural inequalities, some such discourses are, in the terms derived from Gramsci, 'hegemonic': most of the people in the society think about their social relations in these terms, whatever their location in the structural inequalities. (116)

In this way, the very vocabularies in which public discussion is conducted may contribute to the continuation of injustice; that is, discourse itself may be, in a term Young's activist borrows from Habermas (1970), 'systematically distorted' (116). When discourse is systematically distorted,

> Parties to deliberation may agree on premises, they may accept a theory of their situation and give reasons for proposals that the others accept, but yet the premises and terms of the account mask the reproduction of power and injustice. (116)

Young's activist contends that 'The theory and practice of deliberative democracy has no tools for raising the possibility that deliberations may be closed and distorted in this way'; in other words, deliberative democrats lack a theory of 'ideology' (116).[18] Thus, the activist 'believes it important to continue to challenge these discourses and the deliberative processes that rely on them, and often he must do so by non-discursive means' such as 'pictures, songs, poetic imagery, expressions of mockery and longing performed in rowdy and even playful ways'; such acts are 'aimed not at commanding assent but disturbing complacency' (118).[19]

These two serious activist challenges may be summarized as follows. First, the activist has claimed that political discussion must always take place within the context of existing institutions that due to structural inequality grant to certain individuals the power to set discussion agendas and constrain the kinds of options open for consideration prior to any actual encounter with their deliberative opponents; the deliberative process is in this sense rigged from the start to favor the status quo and disadvantage the agents of change. Second, the activist has argued that political discussion must always take place by means of antecedent 'discourses' or vocabularies which establish the conceptual boundaries of the deliberation and hence may themselves be hegemonic or systematically distorting; the deliberative process is hence subject to the distorting influence of ideology at the most fundamental level, and deliberative democrats do not have the resources by which such distortions can be addressed.

As they aim to establish that the deliberativist's program is inconsistent with her own democratic objectives, this pair of charges is, as Young claims, serious (118). However, I contend that the deliberativist has adequate replies to them both.

Part of the response to the first challenge is offered by Young herself. The deliberative democrat does not advocate public political discussion only at the level of state policy, and so does not advocate a program that must accept as given existing institutional settings and contexts for public discussion. Rather, the deliberativist promotes an ideal of democratic politics according to which deliberation occurs at all levels of social association, including households, neighborhoods, local organizations, city boards, and the various institutions of civil society. The long-run aim of the deliberative democrat is to cultivate a more deliberative *polity*, and the deliberativist claims that this task must begin at more local levels and apart from the state and its policies. We may say that deliberativism promotes a 'decentered' (Habermas, 1996: 298) view of public deliberation and a 'pluralistic' (Benhabib, 2002: 138) model of the public sphere; in other words, the deliberative democrat envisions a 'multiple, anonymous, heterogeneous network of many publics and public conversations' (Benhabib, 1996b: 87). The deliberativist is therefore committed to the creation of 'an inclusive deliberative setting in which basic social and economic structures can be examined'; these settings 'for the most part must be outside ongoing settings of official policy discussion' (115).

Although Young characterizes this decentered view of political discourse as requiring that deliberative democrats 'withdraw' (115) from 'existing structural circumstances' (118), it is unclear that this follows. There certainly is no reason why the deliberativist must choose between engaging arguments within existing deliberative sites and creating new ones that are removed from established institutions. There is no need to accept Young's dichotomy; the deliberativist holds that work must be done *both* within existing structures *and* within new contexts. As Bohman argues,

> Deliberative politics has no single domain; it includes such diverse activities as formulating and achieving collective goals, making policy decisions and means and ends, resolving conflicts of interest and principle, and solving problems as they emerge in ongoing social life. Public deliberation therefore has to take many forms. (1996: 53)

The second challenge requires a detailed response, so let us begin with a closer look at the proposed argument. The activist has moved quickly from the claim that discourses *can be* systematically distorting to the claim that all political discourse operative in our current contexts *is* systematically distorting. The conclusion is that properly democratic

objectives cannot be pursued by deliberative means. The first thing to note is that, as it stands, the conclusion does not follow from the premises; the argument is enthymematic. What is required is the additional premise that the distorting features of discussion cannot be corrected by further discussion. That discussion cannot rehabilitate itself is a crucial principle in the activist's case, but is nowhere argued. Moreover, the activist has given no arguments to support the claim that present modes of discussion are distorting, and has offered no analysis of how one might detect such distortions and discern their nature.[20]

Rather than providing a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of systematic distortion, Young provides (in her own voice) two examples of discourses that she claims are hegemonic. First she considers discussions of poverty that presume the adequacy of labor market analyses; second she cites discussions of pollution that presume that modern economies must be based on the burning of fossil-fuels. In neither case does she make explicit what constitutes the distortion. At most, her examples show that some debates are framed in ways that render certain types of proposals 'out of bounds'. But surely this is the case in any discussion, and it is not clear that it is in itself always a bad thing or even 'distorting'. Not all discursive exclusions are distortions because the term 'distortion' implies that something is being excluded *that should be included*. Clearly, then, there are some dialectical exclusions that are entirely appropriate. For example, it is a good thing that current discussions of poverty are often cast in terms that render white supremacist 'solutions' out of bounds; it is also good that pollution discourses tend to exclude fringe-religious appeals to the cleansing power of mass prayer. This is not to say that opponents of market analyses of poverty are on par with white supremacists or that Greens are comparable to fringe-religious fanatics; it is rather to press for a deeper analysis of the discursive hegemony that the activist claims undermines deliberative democracy.

It is not clear that the requested analysis, were it provided, would support the claim that systematic distortions cannot be addressed and remedied within the processes of continuing discourse. There are good reasons to think that continued discussion among persons who are aware of the potentially hegemonic features of discourse can correct the distorting factors that exist and block the generation of new distortions. As Young notes (116), James Bohman (1996: ch. 3) has proposed a model of deliberation that incorporates concerns about distorted communication and other forms of deliberative inequality *within* a general theory of deliberative democracy; the recent work of Seyla Benhabib (2002) and Robert Goodin (2003: chs 9–11) aims for similar goals.

Hence I conclude that, as it stands, the activist's second argument is incomplete, and as such the force of the difficulty it raises for deliberative democracy is not yet clear. If the objection is to stick, the activist

must first provide a more detailed examination of the hegemonic and dis-
torting properties of discourse; he must then show both that prominent
modes of discussion operative in our democracy are distorting in import-
ant ways and that further discourse cannot remedy these distortions.

A further consideration

My call for a more detailed articulation of the second activist challenge
may be met with the radical claim that I have begged the question. It
may be said that my analysis of the activist's challenge and my request
for a more rigorous argument presume what the activist denies, namely,
that arguments and reasons operate independently of ideology. Here the
activist might begin to think that he made a mistake in agreeing to
engage in a discussion with a deliberativist – his position throughout
the debate being that one should decline to engage in argument with
one's opponents! He may say that of course activism seems lacking to
a deliberativist, for the deliberativist measures the strength of a view
according to her own standards. But the activist rejects those standards,
claiming that they are appropriate only for seminar rooms and faculty
meetings, not for real-world politics. Consequently the activist may say
that by agreeing to enter into a discussion with the deliberativist, he had
unwittingly abandoned a crucial element of his position. He may
conclude that the consistent activist avoids arguing altogether, and com-
municates only with his comrades. Here the discussion ends.

However, the deliberativist has a further consideration to raise as
his discursive partner departs for the next rally or street demonstration.
The foregoing debate had presumed that there is but one kind of activist
and but one set of policy objectives that activists may endorse. Yet
Young's activist is opposed not only by deliberative democrats, but also
by persons who also call themselves 'activists' and who are committed
to a set of policy objectives quite different from those endorsed by this
one activist. Once these opponents are introduced into the mix, the
stance of Young's activist becomes more evidently problematic, even by
his own standards.

To explain: although Young's discussion associates the activist always
with politically progressive causes, such as the abolition of the World
Trade Organization (109), the expansion of healthcare and welfare
programs (113), and certain forms of environmentalism (117), not all
activists are progressive in this sense. Activists on the extreme and racist
Right claim also to be fighting for justice, fairness, and liberation. They
contend that existing processes and institutions are ideologically hege-
monic and distorting. Accordingly, they reject the deliberative ideal on the
same grounds as Young's activist. They advocate a program of political

action that operates outside of prevailing structures, disrupting their operations and challenging their legitimacy. They claim that such action aims to enlighten, inform, provoke, and excite persons they see as complacent, naïve, excluded, and ignorant. Of course, these activists vehemently *oppose* the policies endorsed by Young's activist; they argue that justice requires activism that promotes objectives such as national purity, the disenfranchisement of Jews, racial segregation, and white supremacy. More importantly, they see Young's activist's vocabulary of 'inclusion', 'structural inequality', 'institutionalized power', as fully in line with what they claim is a hegemonic ideology that currently dominates and systematically distorts our political discourses.[21]

The point here is not to imply that Young's activist is no better than the racist activist. The point rather is that Young's activist's arguments are, in fact, adopted by activists of different stripes and put in the service of a wide range of policy objectives, each claiming to be just, liberatory, and properly inclusive.[22] In light of this, there is a question the activist must confront. How should he deal with those who share his views about the proper means for bringing about a more just society, but promote a set of ends that he opposes?

It seems that Young's activist has no way to deal with opposing activist programs except to fight them or, if fighting is strategically unsound or otherwise problematic, to accept a Hobbesian truce. This might not seem an unacceptable response in the case of racists; however, the question can be raised in the case of any less extreme but nonetheless opposed activist program, including different styles of politically progressive activism. Hence the deliberativist raises her earlier suspicions that, in practice, activism entails a politics based upon interest-based power struggles amongst adversarial factions.

The deliberativist advances several criticisms of 'adversary democracy'; most important among these for present purposes is the criticism that adversarial modes of democratic politics tend to discourage participation, increase exclusion, occlude options, squelch voices, and cultivate 'civic privatism' (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2003: 8).[23] Early in the discussion, the activist claimed to share the deliberativist's goal of cultivating a more participatory, communicative, inclusive, and engaged democratic politics. If the preceding argument is sound, the activist's mode of political engagement is in practice inconsistent with its own democratic goals.

Conclusion

I hope to have contributed here to the critical engagement between deliberative democracy and political activism initiated by Iris Young. In

responding to the activist challenges, I have drawn upon an implicit conception of deliberative democracy, one that is neither idiosyncratic nor canonical. This conception shares much with views advanced by Benhabib (1996b), Bohman (1996), and Misak (2000), among others, but is identical to none of these. Its general contours are as follows. It sees communication in general and reason-giving in particular as an essentially open-ended and dynamic enterprise; accordingly, it resists any attempt to fix in advance of actual discourse the appropriate terms and content of political discussion. Furthermore, it sees democracy as the ongoing project of applying collective processes of pooled practical reasoning to shared problems; as such, it rejects any attempt to place a priori constraints upon the kinds of issue about which it is appropriate to publicly deliberate. Lastly, as it sees public deliberation as a kind of collective reasoning, the view I have drawn from takes the value of democratic deliberation as partly epistemic rather than strictly procedural (Estlund, 1997; Richardson, 1997);[24] that is, it endorses deliberative politics in part for the epistemic properties of deliberative processes and outcomes (Misak, 2000: 105–6; Dryzek, 2000: 173–4; Young, 1997: 400; Nino, 1996: 107). More specifically, the deliberativism I endorse holds that ongoing processes of public reason-exchange serve not only to *inform* citizens but also to *develop* their critical abilities; public deliberation thus improves the epistemic quality of both the *inputs* of individual deliberators in the discourse and the *outcomes* of their deliberations (Manin, 1987: 352; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 43; Benhabib, 1996b: 87; Bohman, 1996: 27; Valadez, 2001: 32).

As I have indicated, this picture of deliberative democracy is not shared by all deliberativists. Although I cannot present a full argument in defense of this version on the deliberativist position here, it is worth noting that certain other conceptions of deliberative democracy will have a hard time responding to activist challenges. Rawlsian 'public reason' proposals seem especially vulnerable. As they begin from a set of 'conversational restraints' (Ackerman, 1989: 16) placed upon the kind of reasons that are admissible in public debate and furthermore place constraints upon the issues that may be the subject of such discussion,[25] public reason proposals 'remove from the political agenda' (Rawls, 1996: 157) those issues that are deemed too contentious.[26] Rawlsian deliberativists thus 'restrict the agenda' (Benhabib, 2002: 109) of political discussion within a narrow range, thereby rendering certain voices and concerns out of bounds.[27] The activist's objections to this tendency among deliberative democrats seem to me entirely appropriate. Other deliberativist proposals may be open to similar objections.[28]

It is a mark in favor of a version of deliberativism that it can respond to the activist challenges Young has posed. Although Young's activist has not challenged deliberativism in all its forms, the dialectic has

exposed what may be serious problems with certain theories of deliberative democracy. Exponents of those versions of deliberative democracy would do well to attend to the activist challenges posed by Young.

Yet even among those theorists whose deliberativism is not particularly threatened by the proposed activist challenges, Young's essay occasions vital questions. Particularly, deliberative democrats must engage the issue of whether and under what conditions they would endorse the kind of disruptive action advocated by the activist. I of course cannot take this up fully in the present article. My suspicion is that a deliberativist approach to activism must stipulate that proper activism is aimed at *restoring, cultivating, fortifying, and enriching the deliberative process itself* rather than at instituting substantive policies. That is, a deliberativist can endorse an activist mode of political engagement as a means to establishing a properly deliberative system; however, once such a system is in place, substantive questions of justice must be decided by democratic deliberation rather than by activist methods. This response of course raises questions of what a 'properly deliberative system' is, and whether there is any principled way to sustain the distinction between proper deliberative processes and substantive issues of justice. To be sure, these are difficult questions, but I believe satisfactory deliberativist answers can be developed.

Thus I do not pretend in this article to have laid to rest the issue of how deliberative democrats and political activists should respond to each other. As usual, there is more work to be done, more to discuss. I hope only to have succeeded in furthering the debate on behalf of at least one form of deliberativism.

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Notes

1 The relevant articles are Young, 1996, 1997 and 1999; for her book-length treatment, see Young, 2000. See also Hunold and Young, 1998.
2 The implicit reference is to Rawls-style 'public reason' proposals (Rawls, 1999; Larmore, 1996: 134–40; Cohen, 1996; Ackerman, 1989). Recall that, on Rawls's view, the Supreme Court is the 'exemplar' of properly conducted political discussion (1996: 235–9). For a critique, see Talisse, 2003.
3 The principal target here seems to be communitarian and civic republican views. See, for example, Barber's characterization of 'public discourse' as the mechanism by which '*me* language' is transformed into '*we* language' (1998: 13). One might also include Fishkin's 'deliberative opinion polls', in

which participants are suppose to realize that 'the task of citizenship is to rise above self-interest and take seriously the nature of the common good' (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2003: 21).

4 See especially Bessette, 1994. However, many of the major theories deliberative democracy seems to presume a 'norm of orderliness'; see Habermas, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Rawls, 1999; and Fishkin, 1991.

5 For critiques of this aspect of Young's view, see Dryzek, 2000: 64–72; and Benhabib, 1996b: 82–4.

6 Young's view is here allied with the 'agonistic' views promoted by Mouffe (2000), Honig (1993) and Connolly (1993); cf. Hampshire (2000).

7 In this way, her recent work on democracy complements her earlier work on justice (Young, 1990); but see Tebble (2003), who argues that the two projects are in tension.

8 See Goodin, 2003: 12–13; Cohen, 1996: 98; Knight and Johnson, 1994; Sunstein, 1991; Estlund, 1990; Manin, 1987: 350–1.

9 This general characterization appears throughout the literature. Cf. Manin, 1987: 352–4; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 2; Bohman, 1996: 4–9; Benhabib, 1996b: 69–70; Habermas, 1996: ch. 7; Nino, 1996: 121; Cohen, 1997: 72–5; Bohman, 1998: 401; Freeman, 2000: 382; Dryzek, 2001: 651; Forst, 2001: 346; Valadez, 2001: 31; Sunstein, 2003: 81; Miller, 2003: 182–5; and Pettit, 2003: 139–40.

10 Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical citations will refer to Young, 2003.

11 I will speak throughout of *the* deliberativist view as if this were unproblematic. To be sure, there are probably as many versions of deliberativism as there are deliberative democrats, and my remarks suggest a specific style of deliberativism that is not uncontroversial. I shall have something to say about this in the concluding section of the paper.

12 In Young's essay, the activist is male and the deliberativist is female. Young explains her decision to cast the characters in this way in a footnote (119, n. 3). For clarity, I follow her use of the gender pronouns.

13 There are important questions that cannot be engaged here concerning the morality of activist tactics. Certain actions, such as physical assault, are obviously impermissible whereas others, such as non-violent protest, are clearly permissible. Young stipulates that her activist opposes 'intentional violence directed at others' and 'serious' forms of property damage (105). For the sake of argument, I accept this characterization of the activist.

14 Of course, there could be persons who engage in activism and are unreasonable. The point is that being an activist is not a sufficient condition for being unreasonable, which is what the deliberativist criticism seemed to suggest.

15 This is not to say that the reasonable citizen must take her views to be false, or at least not the whole truth. I follow John Stuart Mill (1991: 59) here: even if a view is true, it is 'improved' when subjected to public critical scrutiny in the sense that persons holding the view will come to better understand its grounds; it is hence believed more intelligently.

16 Cf. Valadez, 2001: 31–2; Misak, 2000: 94; and Benhabib, 1996b: 71–2.

17 It is important not to misunderstand Sunstein's use of the term 'extreme'. The point is not that deliberation in ideologically homogeneous groups will lead individuals to embrace views that are progressively 'extreme' by some

extraneous political measure. The point is rather that such deliberation will lead individuals to endorse increasingly more extreme versions of the views they held prior to entering the deliberation.

18 A similar line of criticism is deployed in Przeworski, 1998; Stokes, 1998; and Sanders, 1997.

19 Note that this last comment again exposes the activist to the earlier charge that he is unreasonable because he does not allow for *reasonable* opposition to his views; all opponents are either complacent drones or corrupt power-holders. The deliberativist contends that the activist is on this score not only unreasonable, but naïve.

20 The claim could be that *all* modes of communication are necessarily distorting and ideology-laden. This might explain the lack of analysis, but it would render the activist's view self-referentially defeating.

21 I draw here from Swain and Nieli's (2003) collection of interviews with leaders of prominent racist, anti-Semitic, and white supremacist groups. The logical similarities between the position of Young's activist and that of many of these figures is striking. For example, William Pierce, the late author of *The Turner Diaries*, complains about the exclusive nature of existing institutions, describes his mission as 'educational', advocates 'resistance' and emphasizes the need to create new structures devoted to 'communicating with people, to getting people to accept responsibility for what's happening in the world' (Swain and Nieli, 2003: 272). Lisa Turner, the Women's Information Coordinator for the neo-Nazi World Church of the Creator, claims to be a 'radical activist' aiming to 'bring more racial awareness' to those who have been 'brainwashed and propagandized' by the 'power structure' (Swain and Nieli, 2003: 258). David Duke characterizes his National Organization for European-American Rights as a 'civil rights group' (Swain and Nieli, 2003: 167). Parallels abound throughout the book.

22 Swain (2002) has argued that the vocabulary employed by Young's activist is easily co-opted by the extreme Right, and that this fact explains the recent surge in popularity of such groups in the United States.

23 Cf. Barber, 1984: ch. 1; Mansbridge, 1980: 15–22; and Young, 2000: 20–1.

24 The contrast is discussed in Bohman, 1998: 402–7; Freeman, 2000: 378–9; and List and Goodin, 2001: 277–8.

25 On Rawls's view, only questions of 'constitutional essentials' and 'basic justice' are appropriate for public reason (Rawls, 1996: 214).

26 Cf. Nagel (1991: 166), 'where no common standpoint is available at any level to authorize the collective determination by democratic procedures of policies . . . it is best, if possible, to remove those subjects from the reach of political action'.

27 This criticism of Rawlsian views can be found across the political spectrum. See, for example, Bohman, 1996: 80–9; Mouffe, 1996: 248–53; Benhabib, 1996b: 75–6; Sandel, 1998: 210–18; Scheffler, 2001: ch. 8; Friedman, 2000; George, 1999; and the essays collected in George and Wolfe, 2000.

28 William Galston (1999: 43–5), Stanley Fish (1999), Jack Knight (1999), and Ian Shapiro (2003: 22–6) bring objections against Gutmann and Thompson's view that closely resemble criticisms brought against Rawls. Misak (2000: 35–47) develops a similar kind of criticism of the views of Habermas and Apel.

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