ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Between Radical Democracy And Civic Virtue: Political Piety And Public Moral Argument

The last two decades have seen an upsurge of concern among political philosophers and other scholars regarding the character of citizens and the challenges of diversity (often referred to as multiculturalism or pluralism) to democratic life (Macedo 1990; Guttman 1994; Kahane 1996; Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Galston 2002). These scholars contend that contemporary discussions of politics, public policy, education, and morality in the public sphere should be centrally concerned with the character of citizens in liberal democratic society. The issue of character has perhaps been most assiduously discussed under the theme of civic virtue, and specifically takes stock of a decline in civic participation, the responsibilities of citizenship, rising discontent and disconnect with the life of the polis, the inability of liberal theory to motivate individuals, in short a seeming crisis for liberal democracy. While conceptions of civic virtue are decidedly not new, in fact from the ancient Greeks, through Hobbes, Kant, Rosseau, Mills, and others, it has been an essential part of political theory, its re-emergence in connection with this crisis, and the changing face of democratic life can be seen as a response by liberal democratic theory to the various challenges posed by communitarianism, and radical democratic theories among other accounts of political community.

What motivates liberal political philosophers and other scholars is the search for an answer about the crisis of liberal democracy rooted in the character of the citizen as autonomous democratic subject. This concern has been traditionally articulated as a crisis of civic virtue. Contemporary society is, it is argued, facing a crisis due to the erosion of civic virtues necessary to sustain liberal democratic life. Perhaps the best characterization of this crisis comes from William Galston, who enumerates the various problems we face by noting that we are experiencing: *rising rates of crime, drug abuse, and family breakdown; of the near collapse of effective public education; of greed and shortsightedness run*

amok in public and private affairs; of a steady decline in political awareness and an equally steady rise in political cynicism; and of what I can only regard as the relentless tribalization and barbarization of American life (Galston 1991, p. 6).

While Galston's formulation might legitimately be read as somewhat alarmist, especially his claim to 'relentless tribalization and barbarization', terms that at best require careful definition, the other points articulated are significant social concerns. In responding to such issues, political theorists of all camps, as well as liberal secularists and religious believers, look to citizen character as central node and element of public life. Other scholars have looked at the power of media, and the technocratization of the public sphere not just as narrowing and circumscribing possibilities for citizen participation, but often as corrosive to virtuous public life.

This disquiet over the character of citizens in contemporary society has been reinforced most recently by further concerns over how to strengthen the bonds of citizenship in modern democratic, pluralistic society. To be sure, much has been written about citizenship, diversity, and the demands of the ethno-cultural and religious diversity in our society (Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Gutmann 1994). To this list, the fact of religious pluralism in modern states is often added, and in particular in our post 9/11 world, the concerns over how security, ethnicity, and religion are enmeshed. To a great extent it has been only rather recently that these debates over religion, national security, and ethnicity have come to be discussed as integral to each other. The events of September 11 reawakened with much vigor a perspective that posits that the fate of modern liberal democracies is deeply connected to ethno-cultural diversity, civic virtue, religion, and national security.

A traditional response to this perceived crisis of individual character has been to offer religion as antidote, often followed by pundits and politicians making impassioned pleas for virtuous living according to specific faith traditions. To be sure, questions regarding the role that the religious dispositions of citizens plays, or ought to play in modern democratic states, have long been a staple of political philosophy. By and large however, such treatment has failed to generate answers that bridge division and overcome narrow self-interest formulations. Moreover, in our post 9/11 world religion as catalyst of civic virtue has generated debate from the vantage point of national security. After the events of September 11 however, this relationship has changed, and what we've seen is not an offer of a

generalized notion of religiosity to attenuate the corrosive effects of modern life on the individual and the family, but a strong fundamentalist response that sees western values and civilization under attack, and which seeks to link religion, especially Christianity, indissolubly to responsible democratic citizenship as the only way to secure the nation from the calamities sure to come. Given the centrality of such issues as democratic deliberation, moral argument, and norms of publicity and rhetorical culture to the role of citizens in the public square, to the exercise of voice in leading public life, one would expect that rhetoricians and argumentation theorists would be making key interventions in these debates regarding democratic life. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, that has not been the case. Whether the allegiance be to liberal democratic, communitarian, libertarian, or other notions, there is a clear recognition that a duty of civic responsibility is responsible participation in the life of the polis. Issues of public discourse, civic education, and moral argument are central to resolving the dilemmas faced by a democratic citizenry. It is unfortunate then, that political theorists have largely ignored argumentation and rhetorical scholarship in this debate. A quick read through the most recent political theory work on these issues, although dealing with public morality, multiculturalism, speech codes, and more, reveals an at best antiquated notion of the role of rhetoric and argumentation. In general, the study of public discourse has been relegated (with exceptions by some radical democratic theorists), to a limited conception of public speaking.

In this brief presentation I make the case that scholars of argumentation need to inject themselves more forcefully into the reinvigorated debate about responsible democratic citizenship. Neither liberal democratic theorists of any stripe, communitarian, nor radical democratic theorists have taken enough stock of the rhetorical, and argumentative traditions and their intimate relation to democratic deliberation, beyond procedural norms for decision-making. In making this argument, I highlight briefly the notion of political piety that became rather widespread during the 2000 and 2004 elections in the U.S., as a case regarding the increasing move toward linking arguments regarding personal religiosity as exemplifying a key element of responsible democratic citizenship, albeit a religiosity that is supposedly 'politically illegible'.

1. *Liberal democratic, communitarian, and radical democratic perspectives*
The debates about character and the challenges of ethno-cultural diversity to

democratic society have, by far, taken place within the underlying framework of liberal democratic theory. Political liberals recognize that profound differences exist in how we conceive of the good, and thus liberal democratic theory reflects a privileging of such recognition of the plurality of comprehensive notions of the good as foundational condition for social justice (Rawls 1991, Galston 1991; 2002). Communitarians on the other hand, ground their claims to justice not in a notion of individual conceptions of the good, but in culturally or community-centered understandings of value (Etzioni 1992, Sandel 2005). Particular forms of life give rise to norms and principles for visions of a just society. We can refer to this communitarian perspective as a 'thick' conception rooted in ideas about the substance of such values. In contrast, liberal democratic theory is often described as 'thin' because it seeks to reconcile the plurality of ideas of the good by recourse to shared understandings that allow us to live in harmony, that is, to constitutional procedures by which we 'all can get along'. Liberal perspectives describe the qualities of character necessary to ensure harmonious living regardless of disagreements over comprehensive doctrines of the good (Mouffe 2005). In response to challenges by communitarians, and libertarians, liberal democratic theorists continue to seek the *right balance* to challenging issues of comprehensive notions of the good, in particular that of the role of religious dispositions in public life.

In seeking a balance, liberal democratic thought does not give enough consideration to the persistence, resistance, and/or recalcitrance that emerges not just from how deeply held particular value commitments are, but to the increasingly profound integration of political and non-political commitments of many religious folks. In other words, for at least a significant segment of the population it is particularly difficult to disassociate non-political commitments from political ideas, and as a corollary, to adopt 'thin' shared understandings. This brings us to another dilemma. Although representatives of all sides recognize the importance of collective decision-making in complex democratic society, strong models of democratic deliberation, while paying lip service to conditions of deep plurality, do not account very well for the tight integration of non-political commitments to political commitments by some religious folks in contemporary society. Various deliberative accounts have been advanced, but we remain mired in how to integrate comprehensive doctrines that are, at best, resistant to notions of democratic deliberation as practice of arriving at shared understandings.

Some hope may be gained from the critique posed to liberal democratic and communitarian thought by radical democratic theory. With its commitment to

deep plurality, and to democratic deliberation notions based on a theory of agonism as constitutive of the political, radical democratic thought offers the possibility of opening the space and conditions of democratic deliberation (Mouffe 2000; 1993). However, insight about the role of religion as central to the formative project of citizenship has not been treated extensively by radical democratic theorists.

Over the past generation radical democratic theories have emerged and blossomed as an important intellectual and political force. This emergence reflects a variety of elements, including the dissolution of the cold war, and the accompanying and dizzying crumbling of communist regimes and political philosophy, the challenges to Marxism leveled by political theorists from within, challenges to political liberalism and its reliance on notions of an autonomous self, the challenges to liberalism presented by multiculturalism and pluralism, and a confidence crisis in the capabilities of democratic regimes to meet the needs of citizens as globalizing pressures increase. Some of that is reflected in the rapid distanciation from, and the growing apathy to, the people from governance. The disconcerting pace of globalization, undermining the nation-state as central unit of democratic government, the radicalization of xenophobic discourses, the diminution of civil rights, and the increase in fundamentalist violence (physical and discursive) all which have been exacerbated since September 11, 2001, also contribute to a perceived need to readdress the limits of liberalism and communitarianism as democratic theories. Radical democratic theorists have challenged dearly held assumptions about democratic life, governance, and political thought that need be heeded, even though it has received plenty of criticism itself as consisting of a weak political vision (Ackerman and Fishkin 2002; Fung 2004; Mouffe 2000).

Inspired by post-structuralist, and to some extent, postmodern, theories, Radical Democratic theorists walk a tightrope between Marxist, political liberal democratic, and communitarian perspectives, critiquing and borrowing from each. Perhaps quite telling still, is the opening line of what can be considered the first programmatic and comprehensive statement of Radical Democratic thought, Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: *Left-wing thought today stands at a crossroads. The evident truths of the past have been seriously challenged by an avalanche of historical mutations which have riven the ground on which those truths were constituted* (Laclau, Mouffe

1985).

If anything their analysis is urgently significant today, in light of the issues I noted above, and not only for the 'left' as conceived in their original prescription. In other words, the radical democratic imaginary, no less now than in 1985, operates deconstructively through and within democratic political thought.

The question of democratic legitimacy is central to radical democratic thought, as proponents of this approach seem committed to broader participation by the public in decisionmaking, and thus to a deliberative approach to democratic life. The radical democratic ethos is a commitment to a radical pluralist and inclusive democratic vision, with thorough contestation. In short, an agonistic model of the public sphere. Democracy thus conceived, is not a what, but a how, and constantly in motion as processes of democratization are always challenging any sedimentation, and always seeking to add new voices to challenge the adequacy of any particular account. Democracy for radical democrats is, as Slavoj Zizek would say, a sublime object of desire: something that drives us, but never to be attained. Democratic contestation is ongoing, and has as its core a continual challenge between that which unites us and that which dissolves those bonds, between the universal and particular. The wholeness we find in unity is perforce fictitious, it is a construction driven by symbolic inducement, as is also our division, our separateness.

Both Liberal and Radical democrats favor a deliberative model of civic participation in which citizens engage in reasoned debate about matters important to the polis. Such democratic deliberation is seen as better than systems of competitive representation because, 'of advantages in identifying problems, collaborating in their resolution, testing solutions to see if they are well-tailored to local circumstance, and disciplining solutions by reference to solutions adopted elsewhere' (Cohen, Fung, 24). However, the radical democratic inclination toward a proliferation of voices, identities, communities, and allegiances as part of an ongoing process of democratization seems to challenge the very possibility of reasoned deliberation as category of exclusion from the political community. Radical democratic thought therefore eschews the notion that legitimate discourse in a democracy emerges from a common ground, that is, it does not endorse some common ground, the shared understandings of liberal democratic theory, as needed for public reasoning for this would shut out some voices. Chantal Mouffe's critique of John Rawl's theory of political liberalism is

particularly salient in highlighting the inherent limits of Rawl's position for true democratic deliberation (Mouffe 2005). Yet, radical democratic thought recognizes and fosters plurality at the same time that it calls us to recognize our inherent ability, and need, to build allegiances, to erect commonality (always temporary and contingent), through the exercise of our public voice. In other words, radical democracy fosters unity and commonality out of difference, but reasserts difference and contestation as the basis of any project of identity and identification.

Contrary to political liberalism, radical democracy values what William Connolly calls a deep plurality, to be valued over a shallow secular pluralism, seen as part of the project of political liberalism that has attendant notions of demarcated spaces for different groups in the public realm (Connolly 2005). Moreover, radical democracy is not invested in the liberal project of finding just the right amount of religion to add to the public sphere. Radical democratic thought, unlike liberal theory, is not inclined to finding a balance between church and state of just the right universal proportion.

2. *Political piety: legible illegibility*

What continues to be most intriguing in this ever-present debate however, are the arguments by which religion is tied not just to citizen character, but to the character of the nation through the character of political candidates, and to the effective exercise of their office. From 2000 to now we've seen a tremendous shift in political strategy regarding the importance of religion to political officeholders and their office. From the old sedate position of recognizing the religious diversity of the nation and their own generalized religious understandings, political candidates have been moved to assert with deep conviction their personal religious beliefs and how these might influence their public policy thinking. In the recent political climate, political strategists apparently have advised candidates to wear their religion 'on their sleeves' during their campaigns. This strategy has come to be referred to by some pundits as the politics of political piety, and has replaced the conception of the role of elected officials as shapers of the inchoate moral longing of multiple publics into a generalized moral vision of the nation. A quick glance at U.S. history reveals that candidates specifying their religious commitments as a way to stake out virtuous identity amid moments of moral crisis is not a new phenomenon. Yet, a 1999 *New York Times* article titled 'White House Seekers Wear Faith on Sleeve and Stump' notes that the upcoming 2000 campaign 'the rite of political piety' moved 'far beyond the sacramental photo

opportunity. The candidates are engaging in 'God talk' that is more explicit, more intimate and more pervasive than at any time in recent decades'. Hence, during the campaign we saw Al Gore stating that he was 'a child of the Kingdom and a person of strong faith', and George W. Bush describing how he recommitted 'my life to Jesus Christ' (Goodstein 1999).

During the 1999 presidential campaign in the U.S. the term political piety gained particular salience. Elizabeth Dole noted that she had submitted to God completely. Gov. Bush at the time, made clear that he had recommitted his life to Jesus Christ, and in fact, that he believed the Bible was the most important philosophy book he had ever read. Vice President Gore, not far behind, stated that 'faith is the center of my life. I don't wear it on my sleeve. I think the purpose of life is to glorify god'. In addition, by including Joe Liebermann into the democratic party ticket, democratic strategists believed, and stated, that 'The Democratic party is going to take back God this time' (Goodstein 1999; Niebuhr 2000; Scheer 1999; Wheatcroft 2000). Political piety also makes great appearances in the 2004 campaign, with Howard Dean, Wesley Clark, John Kerry, and others making clear their religious bona fides, even granting interviews to internet giant Beliefnet.com. Religious leaders responded to such political piety in various ways, a telling guest editorial by the Rev. Jesse Jackson in 2004 carried the headline: 'Bush's public piety is appealing but his public policy is destructive' (Jackson 2004). Many other articles in various newspapers and magazines noted the importance of political piety, with party strategists recommending that candidates clearly express their religious beliefs as part of the campaign stumping (Chadwick 2004; McNamara 2004; Mulligan 2004; Waldman 2004).

Concomitant to these expressions of political piety, a major provocative tension emerged. For many candidates, political piety was conceived as a strategic appeal. On one hand expressing the deep significance of their religious conviction, yet on the other hand denying that such convictions held any theo-political influence on their governance. The argument for the acceptance of such political piety as fine part of the political life of candidates was grounded on the supposed political illegibility of religious belief. Political piety (religious disposition), candidates and some commentators tell us, is neither right nor left. If we are to believe this argument for religion's political illegibility religion does not fit within liberal, progressive, democratic, conservative, or republican labels. This argument has perhaps been made most assiduously by a popular bumper sticker that reads 'God is neither Democrat nor Republican' (Sojourner's Community). In

effect, as Jason Bivins argues, political illegibility has emerged as a defining argument of various religious groups in the American landscape (Bivins 2003). Such political piety thus is conceived as inhabiting an illegible space between religious argument and civic virtue, seen as free of the dangers of religion in the public square.

There is, of course, a serious contradiction in claiming the significance of religious disposition to political character, while at the same time discounting its political legibility. Religious claims to political illegibility constitute a strategic way of enunciating public moral arguments that seek to avoid the political contestation necessary for building and sustaining democratic community. Paradoxically, this attitude reveals a conception of democracy as procedural form, rather than the substantive engagement and non-neutral perspective for building democratic community that religious leaders hold it to be. Political piety after all is completely about religious value being not only legible, but central to the articulation of political identity and democratic values. Hence, political illegibility claims on the part of religion constitute a privileged claim to public participation, while carving an exemption of sorts to the radical democratic ethos of deep agonistic deliberation.

3. *Conclusion*

Under radical democratic thought, no less than under political liberalism and communitarianism, we still remain with a persistent question: 'can religious belief be a legitimate ground for constructing public policy'. Can it be so within a radically pluralist and inclusivist democratic philosophy? Other ways to formulate the questions remain, and I offer them as food for thought: 'what kind of challenge does religious diversity pose for radical democratic politics?' Given the deep commitment to inclusivity and agon in radical democratic politics, these questions can be easily extended to argument theory. One way of giving expression to such concerns is the following: 'what are the ethical implications of arguments (and for argument theory) over the place of religion in democratic society, given the agonistic politics of radical democracy, that as Chantal Mouffe has argued, cannot prescribe specific goods to its citizens?'

I offer here that we have had minimal theorizing about this issue within radical democratic thought, and that we as argumentation scholars are uniquely positioned to advance this debate. In pondering these questions we ought to be motivated by the growing talk, first, of political piety, especially during the 1999-2000 political campaign, and more recently of 'values' voters, in the 2004

campaign, and in general U.S. politics. The values voter phrase in particular is intriguing, for it begs the question 'who isn't?' The advent of radical democratic thought calls us to pay attention to notions of vigorous argumentation and discursive contestation to democratic participatory culture. However, scholars in public argument should recognize that public moral argument cannot be conceived solely in terms of deliberation as drawing citizens into the public square. Citizens are already deeply entrenched in the public in myriad ways, and with tightly held non-political commitments, in other words, there is already thick participation in ways that might not accord to proposed deliberative models. Alternative conceptions of political participation and substantial deliberation must be explored and proposed.

The poles of the dilemma posed by the persistent question of religious belief as legitimate ground for public policy can be characterized in two sides, those that are radically inclusivist (these take the position that religion in the public square is not threatening to the actual possibility of agreement), and those in favor of a model of civic virtue that sees arguments from specific faith traditions as finding the right home in the private. With its ethos to radical pluralism, radical democratic thought seems to be inclined toward an inclusivist position, even if only because, it believes new approaches, democratic possibility, and reinvigoration of democratic practice can be had through the multiplicity of discourses. And yet, it is precisely the limits of such position that have not been thoroughly examined. Can we confer democratic legitimacy on the efforts of fundamentalists that are inimical to democratic thought itself, and that eschew or have no interest in democratic deliberation to begin with, remaining insulated from the actual practice of argument, from political debate? I believe scholars of argumentation, are not only well poised, but best suited to move these arguments forward.

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