Avoiding Deliberative Democracy? Micropolitics, Manipulation, and the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This article examines the critique of deliberative democracy leveled by William Connolly. Drawing on both recent findings in cognitive science as well on Gilles Deleuze's cosmological pluralism, Connolly argues that deliberative democracy, and the contemporary left more generally, is guilty of intellectualism for overlooking the embodied, visceral register of political judgment. Going back to Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, this article reconstructs the working assumptions of Connolly's critique and argues that it unwittingly leads to an indefensible embrace of manipulation. Against his micropolitics of visceral manipulation, I propose an alternative route for realizing Connolly's politics of agonistic negotiation in the form of a critical theory of the public sphere.

Deliberative democracy is a fantasy, and a dangerous one at that. A politics of pure deliberation is the dream of hare-brained philosophy professors who, fetishizing consensus, would reduce all political conflict to moral disagreement, purge passion from politics, and substitute the disinterested and boring experience of jury duty for the vital and indispensable experience of action, and all this just for the sake of theoretical parsimony. At its best deliberative democracy's moralization and rationalization of politics stinks of a bad nostalgia for a classical participatory democracy that never existed. At its worst, it is a license for an exclusionary politics of elite decision making that silences the voices of the needy and degenerates into a variant of technocratic management from above.
Or so much of the rhetoric of its critics goes. That this caricature of deliberative democracy is familiar ought to be the occasion for some worry. A general skepticism concerning the claims of public reason has seeped into much of the landscape of contemporary political theory, making this kind of easy rejection of deliberation both comprehensible and all too plausible. Yet this kind of rejection is too fast and depends on a straw man account of what deliberative democracy means. The aim of this article is to make the case that this caricature is wrong and that such skepticism about public reason is unwarranted. Deliberative democracy is a robust theory of the political that, at its best, lays the groundwork for an egalitarian and even radical democratic politics. To this end, I propose to read the recent work of William E. Connolly as an expression of political theory’s skeptical critique of public reason. Connolly is exemplary of this wider skepticism in that while he offers a powerful critique of deliberative democracy, his critical alternative is only plausible when rearticulated as a variant of deliberative democracy itself.

Connolly argues that contemporary findings in neuroscience and cognitive science, mixed with a healthy dose of Gilles Deleuze’s cosmological pluralism, reveal a deep, visceral register of human thinking that theories of deliberative democracy overlook at their own peril. Deliberative democracy’s rationalism turns a blind eye to this political unconscious and relegates the theory to an ineffectual “intellectualism,” but, according to Connolly, the left today needs to make this unconscious lower register its fighting grounds if it hopes to hold its ground against an insurgent neoconservative “micropolitics” of media manipulation. This is a suggestive line of argument, but ought it lead to a rejection of deliberative democracy or instead to a more robust and complex account of communicative agency in our media-saturated world?

Connolly travels the first route, but I argue that his alternative to deliberation that he dubs “micropolitics,” a politics of the ordinary that politicizes habits, dispositions, feelings, the body, emotions, and thinking as potential sites of domination and resistance below the register of formal principles and procedures, can only be defended by following the second route. Given the way that Connolly presents the problem of the visceral register there does not seem to be much role for deliberation in his vision of democratic politics. While he often stresses that “intellectualism is constitutively insufficient to ethics,” he strains to remind us that saying this is not the same as saying that deliberation has no role to play (2002, 111). Issuing a series of caveats, Connolly notes that “nothing in the
above carries the implication of eliminating argument, rationality, language, or conscious thought from public discourse” and that he only means “to flag the insufficiency of argument to ethical life without denying its pertinence” (1999, 36; 2002, 108). The goal of his turn to micropolitics is not to replace deliberation but rather to “augment intellectualist models of thinking and culture” (2002, 13). Given the role of affective modes of appraisal in politics, I agree with Connolly that theories of public reason ought to be amended and “augmented” in many ways. Yet, for all his caveats, Connolly’s vision of micropolitical engagement seems to give short shrift to practices of public deliberation. Indeed, his theory only announces their compatibility but does not follow through in enacting it. In what follows, I try to close this circle, so to speak, by demonstrating the deliberative potential of Connolly’s agonistic pluralism. I agree that a politics of the visceral reveals the shortcomings of theories of deliberative democracy that prioritize small community meetings and experimental “mini-publics” as the sine qua non of democratic citizenship today, but Connolly overlooks the resources provided by an alternative account of deliberative democracy; namely, a critical and sociologically complex theory of deliberative democracy that aims at revising our self-understandings and provoking self-transformation.

INTELLECTUALISM AND THE VISCERAL REGISTER

The first step in exploring the potential of William Connolly’s reluctant theory of deliberative democracy is to come to terms with the reasons why he thinks extant accounts of communicative politics are insufficient. Intellectualism, Connolly argues, is the grand failing of deliberative democracy. In accusing deliberative democracy of intellectualism, he is not issuing a by-now familiar criticism of deliberative rationalism. To say that deliberative democracy is guilty of intellectualism is not to say that it is blind to questions of power, or identity, or difference—or at least it’s not only to say this—but rather that deliberative models of democracy are working with a faulty conception of thinking. They have been captured by what Gilles Deleuze calls “the image of thought”—the idea that thinking is an autonomous, linguistically mediated process of mind that is oriented toward coherence and truth (1994, 129–67). Deliberative thinking takes place at one relatively transparent register where our reasons for action can be compared, reasoned about, and revised through the force of the better argument. This image of thought is intellectualist because it fails to see how thought is a layered process of neural, perceptual, and embodied activity not reducible
to conceptual ratiocination alone. “Attempts to give priority to the highest and conceptually most sophisticated brain nodules in thinking and judgment,” Connolly argues, “may encourage those invested in these theories to underestimate the importance of body image, unconscious motor memory, and thought-imbued affect” (2002, 10).

Against the intellectualist image of thought, Connolly argues that thinking is distributed across multiple registers that make possible “visceral modes of appraisal” (1999, 27). It is these deep, intensive, and reactive visceral modes of thinking and judgment that the deliberative image of thinking overlooks. Disgust, for example, is a visceral response that makes your stomach turn. It seems to well up inside you without your willing it. The values and beliefs of others can sometimes stimulate this kind of feeling, say, if they present you with a defense of cloning, or euthanasia, or gay marriage, as the case may be. You can’t always put your finger on what it is that strikes you as so disgusting and morally contaminating about such proposals, but sometimes you just feel that they are plain wrong. We’re unable to provide defensible reasons for our responses. Sometimes things just rub us the wrong way.

Connolly’s point is that visceral and embodied responses like disgust, shame, and hatred come to play a role in political decision making—as they evidently do in political deliberations about matters such as cloning, euthanasia, and gay marriage—and that a deliberative approach is poorly equipped to deal with them. Deliberative democrats either require that these sorts of affective feelings are purged from the public sphere as unfortunate distortions of real communication, or they suggest that they can be subject to deliberation and argument just as any other sort of belief, interest, or prejudice can be. Connolly thinks that both of these approaches are bound to fail. Visceral reactions are not conceptually sophisticated thoughts and as such are not amenable to deliberation, argumentation, or verbal persuasion. The exchange of validity claims alone is not enough to stop your stomach from churning when you think about the right to die. Deliberative democrats need to learn “how much more there is to thinking than argument” and to begin experimenting with alternative forms of political engagement (1999, 149). Because political judgment is so often carried out at the level of this visceral or virtual register, deliberation cannot provide a privileged or efficacious form of participation, justification, or transformation.

To corroborate these claims about the multiple registers of thinking, Connolly turns to recent findings in neuroscience that suggest a more intimate relationship between reason, the emotions, and the body than
the intellectualist account assumes. Like some other political theorists, Connolly hopes that a closer engagement with neurology and cognitive science will provide grounds for a more adequate account of subjectivity, reason, and ethics. The kind of thinking that intellectualists privilege—sophisticated, conceptual, reflective, deliberative, and linguistically mediated thought—pertains to the activity of the largest part of the brain, the cerebral cortex. It is through the rich and complex layers of neural activity in the cortex that we can perform intricate activities like planning, speaking, reasoning, and arguing. What recent findings in neuroscience suggest, however, is that cortical activity is not autonomous and is in fact in some ways subservient to the parts of the brain that control emotions, memory, and affect.

In particular, the cortex responds to information from the limbic system, the small curved part of the brain below the cortex that controls emotion and fine motor movement. Made up of the basal ganglia, the hippocampus, and the amygdala, the limbic system enables the fast, intensive, and reactive action of affects. The jolt of fear that makes one’s hair stand on end or the disgust that we feel in the pit of our stomachs is the work of the part of the limbic system called the amygdala. The sort of reactions governed by this system are an evolutionary necessity for a species that needs to appraise and respond to dangerous situations quickly and effectively without much cognitive expenditure. The decision to jump out of the way of a speeding car needs to happen in a split second. It is not the sort of situation that allows you to deliberate about the relative merits of your different options before acting. But this is not to say that the limbic system is entirely thoughtless. It is not concerned with sophisticated, conceptual, and deliberative thinking, but its actions certainly are symbolically mediated or “thought imbued” in some sense (the expression is Connolly’s). These intense affective responses are not entirely biologically determined but instead take a fair deal of cultural learning. The limbic system in a sense learns or records cultural standards of what is dangerous and what is disgusting and then habituates them as automated response.

Between the cortex and limbic system there is a “feedback loop” of mutual influence through which these fast, affective, “proto-thoughts” of the limbic system shape the slow, reflective thinking of the cortex (2002). The existence of these intensive, instinctive elements moving below the register of reflective judgment means that human reason is not pure and autonomous but rather is shaped in a complex way at the neural level by the influence of the emotions and affects. David Hume, it would seem,
was right to say that reason is in fact the slave of the passions. And what this means for politics is that the emotions and affects that shape and guide thinking are themselves deeply influenced by values and opinions that we may or may not actually want to endorse. Racist, sexist, homophobic, and other ideological sentiments may lodge themselves deeply into this “body-brain-culture network” (2002). Where this is the case, valid and sound argumentation is at a loss to dislodge them and the force of the better argument may be powerless to persuade us to respect, tolerate, or trust each other in the ways that democratic cooperation require. Connolly explains:

Culturally preorganized charges shape perception and judgment in ways that exceed the picture of the world supported by the models of calculative reason, intersubjective culture, and deliberative democracy. They show us how linguistically complex brain regions respond not only to events in the world but also, proprioceptively, to cultural habits, skills, memory traces, and affects mixed into our muscles, skin, gut, and cruder brain regions. (2002, 36)

This all culminates in a critique of deliberative models of democracy: the inability of practical reason to influence these potentially dangerous or hateful “culturally preorganized charges” points to its undoing.

**VISCERAL POLITICS**

Before analyzing the merits of Connolly’s critique of deliberative democracy I want to first situate his charge of intellectualism within its political context. At its heart, Connolly’s objection to the deliberative turn in democratic theory boil down to his belief that too much focus on the terms of justification and legitimation ignores the everyday sensibilities expressed and reproduced in the actions of citizens. These sensibilities are not identical to doctrinal beliefs or articulate reasons; or, as he prefers to put it in his most recent book, spirituality is not identical with doctrinal creed (2008). Rather, the sensibility that determines how it is that we hold our beliefs or “creed” is unreflectively informs this visceral register of judgment and thinking. Where these sensibilities have been cultivated to promote respect, responsiveness, and generosity a pluralistic liberalism can thrive. The political problem, however, is that in contemporary America this noble ethos is largely absent. Instead Connolly argues that this visceral register has become a vehicle for a “stingy” sensibility animated by resentment, fear,
and a desire for revenge (1999, 7). The deep roots of existential resentment in an increasingly disempowered American working class today provide the spiritual common ground for the an emerging coalition of competing neoconservative and neoliberal elites who share a punitive and vengeful ethic while disagreeing on matters of doctrine. The resulting theological-corporate-media apparatus Connolly calls “the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” wreaks havoc on American democracy today as it proceeds to undermine the terms of liberal pluralism and roll back the hard-won achievements of the liberal democratic struggles of the last hundred years (2008, 39–68). Democratic theory’s idea of deliberation seems poorly equipped to confront this threat.

Connolly’s contention is that the failing of the left in America today is due in no small part to its resistance to accepting the role of the visceral register in politics. Instead, it is still caught up in a potentially antiquated search for some better argument that would bring reason and truth together to serve the ends of justice. The American right, however, has been a much better student of the visceral elements of thinking and has crafted an array of strategies that seek to manipulate it to punitive ends. Among working-class Americans who have suffered unemployment with the collapse of the industrial economy, cultural alienation from a powerfully secular and liberal cultural elite, and social fragmentation from the increasing speed, ethnic pluralism, and diversity of a globalizing world, there exists a reserve of resentment to be tapped. Neoliberals and neoconservatives on the American right have overcome their traditional antagonism to draw on this resentment and channel it into a shared spirituality of revenge that vilifies foreigners, immigrants, nonwhites, women, queers, liberals, and secularists.7 Crucial to the success of this resonance machine has been its most powerful echo chamber: the media. Savvy exploitation of new media technologies enable conditions of mass persuasion through which the sentiments of resentment are validated, entering “the thought-imbued feelings of viewers before being subjected to critical scrutiny” (2008, 55), and channeled to political ends. Twenty-four-hour news shows, aggressive and partisan pundits, and the constant fluctuation of terror alerts all combine to excite, code, and steer visceral fear and anxiety. The result is the proliferation of “ugly dispositions” that the powerful media machinery of the right “can foment and amplify, installing them in habitual patterns of perception, identity, interest, and judgments of entitlement” (2008, 53).

Micropolitics as the manipulation of embodied, intensive affects along the visceral register of thinking is a familiar tactic in the repertoire of
commercial capitalism and the state. Marketers and advertisers have long drawn on findings in psychology, neurobiology, and related fields to manufacture the desires their commodities satisfy. Branding is only the most recent affective technique of assuring consumer loyalty in a long history of unconscious and unwilled consumption. Marketers now talk about “low-involvement advertising” that bypasses the higher-level cognitive functions of viewers to appeal to nonconscious mental processing. Similarly, the manipulation of intensive reactions and affect has been crucial in sustaining consent for America’s open-ended “war on terror.” The color-coded terror alert system in place to warn Americans of the likelihood of terrorist attacks functions as a perceptual marker by which public fear and anxiety are calibrated. The aggressive rhetorical tactics, facial gestures, and vocal timbre of conservative media pundits like Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh as well as the explosive graphics, and fast cutting techniques of twenty-four-hour news channels all have the effect of expressing the spinelessness of the “liberals” they browbeat. And the list goes on. Techniques of affective persuasion that function through “sub-discursive modes of communication” are ubiquitous and powerful in the modern world (2008, 66). The challenge of confronting them today, Connolly wagers, means learning to play their game. The left is done arguing. It’s time to learn how “fight fire with fire” (2006, 74).

WHAT KIND OF POLITICS ARE MICROPOLITICS?

A more fundamental source of Connolly’s skepticism about deliberative democracy than the findings of neurological science is Gilles Deleuze’s cosmological pluralism. In Connolly’s texts, these scientific and metaphysical sources dovetail elegantly, but one is always left with the impression that the scientific arguments are deployed only to the extent that they readily accord with these more basic philosophical commitments to a deep and radical pluralism in the world. Deleuze’s concepts of multiplicity, rhizomes, micropolitics, deterritorialization, and war machines infuse Connolly’s writing and offer an alternative discourse to the allegedly problematic language of public reason. In fact, Deleuze himself, in his magisterial collaboration with Félix Guattari, could be said to prefigure a certain denigration of deliberative politics. It would of course be anachronistic to describe Deleuze and Guattari as critics of deliberative democracy, or even worse, as denizens of the American culture wars. But that said, there are passing remarks concerning deliberation in their texts that seem to connect with
Connolly’s claims. More important than decision making and deliberation are the molecular and unconscious forces that open us up to new ways of thinking and experiencing the world. When Deleuze and Guattari do mention political deliberation it is invariably to dismiss it as an example of what they call arboreal, state thinking:

Politics operates by macrodecisions and binary choices, binary interests; but the realm of the decidable remains very slim. Political decision making necessarily descends into a world of microdeterminations, attractions, and desires, which it must sound out or evaluate in a different fashion. Beneath linear conceptions and segmentary decisions, an evaluation of flows and their quanta. (1987, 221)

A politics that addresses these microdeterminations, what Deleuze and Guattari call micropolitics, is more basic than deliberation because it concerns the boundaries of “the realm of the decidable.” The appeal of reason can only function within existing narrow and rigid boundaries. Strategic appeals to affect, however, can help close or expand this realm and open up new issues to deliberation and participation. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari consider micropolitics as essentially underlying deliberation. Creative becoming, not practical reason, is at the heart of their vision of politics.

How does a democratic micropolitics, then, attempt to reshuffle the rigid segments of a stingy American public culture? Connolly argues that the only way we can achieve a “public ethos of pluralism” is by cultivating the “civic virtues” of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (2005, 65). If the work of politics aspires to more than a further round in a vicious circle of existential revenge, citizens must first nurture an ethics of “micropolitical receptivity” to the interdependence of their conflicting identities claims in a complex, ever faster late-modern world (1999, 149). To this end, Connolly draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking to devise tactics and techniques of “nudging” or exerting “modest influence” on the visceral register of the self and of public culture more widely (2002, 77; 1999, 29). In some passages, Connolly describes this as the search for “more expansive modes of persuasion,” while in others he appeals to the force of a sort of “mystical experience” (1999, 8; 2002, 120). Yet this dependence on Deleuze and Guattari’s “micropolitics” draws Connolly away from his own best insights and leads him to marginalize the democratic core of a leftist response to an insurgent neoconservative micropolitics.
Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy provides a powerful tool for theorizing the symbolic meanings and dispositions carried at visceral register of experience. While they do not frame their project in terms of embodied registers or the differential processing structures of brain, they provide an analogous conception of experience, drawing on Henri Bergson’s concept of “the virtual” (Bergson 1990; Deleuze 1988). Emotions, memory traces, infrasensible experiences, habitual gestures, and the unconscious exist “virtually,” such that we cannot always articulate them at the level of language, yet they play a role in shaping our higher-register experiences of the world. The virtual represents a lower register of experience than the conscious and reflective register of ideas, doctrines, and interests. To the extent that *A Thousand Plateaus* can be regarded as a text of political philosophy, it can be said to be a treatise concerned with political potential of this virtual register as both a site of subjectification and resistance.

Micropolitics is Deleuze and Guattari’s name for this politics of the virtual. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of micropolitics in their analysis of political regimes. Against the received image of the state as a centralized, stable, and sovereign territorial entity, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the state is better described as a macropolitical assemblage that depends on more ubiquitous, fluid, and supple micropolitical assemblages. The molar organization of the state depends on a micro- or molecular organization of forces such as affects, moods, memories, and habits that sustain and propagate the state’s ends. “In short,” they write, “everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics” (1987, 213).

Despite appearances to the contrary, even the most monolithic and centralized assemblages of power, such as the state, are in fact fluid and lively micro-assemblages resonating together in an only relatively stable manner. Taking the stark example of the fascist state, Deleuze and Guattari make the case that it too is in fact only a decentered plurality that depends on the micropolitics that sustain it:

The concept of the totalitarian State applies only at the macropolitical level, to a rigid segmentarity and a particular mode of totalization and centralization. But fascism is inseparable from a proliferation of molecular focuses in interaction, which skip from point to point, before beginning to resonate together in the National Socialist State. Rural fascism and city or neighborhood fascism, youth fascism and war veteran’s fascism, fascism on
the Left and fascism on the Right, fascism of the couple, family, school, and office: every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole. (1987, 214)

Their redescription of these kinds of major assemblages of power in terms of their molecular makeup opens up a new strategic awareness of the multiple sites of rupture, destabilization, and transformation through which citizens can challenge them. The fact that the forces animating the macroregister of politics also animate the microregister means that there exists a sort of feedback loop between the two registers, such that action at one level makes for consequences at the other. Because power is not reducible to the authority of the state or any other macropolitical hegemon, local experiments and struggles by citizens, market forces, and media producers have broad cultural and institutional effects on.

To appraise Connolly’s turn to micropolitics it is important to understand what vision of political action follows from Deleuze and Guattari’s original formulation. For Deleuze and Guattari political action is fundamentally creative and reactive. Citizens act by unleashing new forces and energies that disrupt and deterritorialize received molar orders of power and desire. Social movements, thinkers, and dissidents create new practices, new identities, and new values that aim to transform established assemblages. This creative aspect of politics is the first step in destabilizing rigid and reified practices. Connolly calls the proliferation of these dynamic, creative movements the “politics of becoming” (1999, 47–72). To effectively decenter received identities, desires, and self-conceptions, however, these new values have to engage politically with the existing public culture that constrains them. Political theorists following Hegel have described this process as a dialogical struggle for recognition. Deleuze and Guattari, however, refuse the language of subjectivity and of subjects who seek to recognize one another and instead cast the struggle in posthumanist terms as “the flash of the war machine, arriving from without” (1987, 353).

Micropolitics as a model of political engagement is the combat of war machines, nomadic war machines versus the state’s appropriation of the war machine, war machines of the left against the resonance machines of the right. The war machine works through “secrecy, speed, and affect” and represents “another kind of justice” from law or the state. War as armed conflict itself is not necessarily the object of the war machine, but its desirable power of displacement “institutes an entire economy of violence, in
other words, a way of making violence durable, even unlimited.” The war machine is the weapon that the herd or the pack uses to create “smooth space” against the “striated space” of the state (1987, 356, 352, 396, 384). It is continually reconstituted by minorities populating the edges and fringes of the collective body of the state. With it, nomads and barbarians lay siege to the gates of empire.

What is this war machine? As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “An ‘ideological,’ scientific, or artistic movement can be a potential war machine, to the precise extent to which it draws, in relations to a *phylum*, a plane of consistency, a creative line of flight, a smooth space of displacement” (1987, 422–23). The promotion of creative forms of becoming rather than violence and armed conflict are the core concerns of a war machine. That said, Deleuze and Guattari’s bellicose language here seems both unfortunate and out of place in a text that otherwise advocates cautious and delicate experimentation. The language of the war machine and Deleuze and Guattari’s apparent praise of violence and another kind of justice seem difficult to square with the allegedly egalitarian credentials of micropolitics. The ability to create to new identities and values certainly is a kind of “force” that citizens have the power to unleash on society, and certainly it is this disclosive sense of “force” rather than a necessarily bellicose and violent one that Deleuze and Guattari have in mind. For these reasons Paul Patton (2000, 115–27) has argued that Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the war machine would better be thought of as a “metamorphosis machine” with a lineage going back to Nietzsche’s reevaluation of all values rather than to Clausewitz’s concept of total war. Portrayed in these more gentle terms, micropolitics can be defended in the terms of Connolly’s pluralistic but critical liberalism. Patton gives the example of indigenous land claims as an instance of such a metamorphosis machine—creative political claims making—that destabilizes and transforms existing juridical structures of power and identity.

Patton’s attempt to fold Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the war machine back into a liberal politics of accommodation may be a promising adaptation of the concept, but it misses a key element of Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of micropolitics: conflict. The nomadic war machine is fundamentally an oppositional and reactive force that seeks to break down and deterritorialize existing assemblages and orders. Micropolitics aims to destabilize and transform subconscious, unreflective, and affective sensibilities that hinder the creative becoming of new identities and values. Unlike a struggle for recognition, this process of transformation
is not primarily a dialogical or reciprocal enterprise in which the two parties exchange claims and concerns and attempt to forge some common ground. Instead, the war machine comes from outside and attacks. Activists create war machines to be “plugged” into other collective machines and orders of discourse. A machine, an order, a structure is destabilized by attacking the intensive energies and affects that sustain it. Deleuze and Guattari capture this prioritization of conflict in their distinction between two uses of conceptual innovations, what they call weapons and tools (1987, 393–403). Weapons are inventions used to disrupt and attack. A tool, by contrast, is an invention that builds and sustains common shelters and structures. A war machine uses weapons as projectiles to lay siege to the state. The tool is something they associate with the drudgery of exploited labor and the apparatus of capture. The war machine seeks to undermine the regime of tools through the mobilization of affects as projectiles. “Weapons are affects and affects weapons” (1987, 400). Micropolitics concerns conflict at the level of affect, disposition, sensibility, ethos. But might not democracy as a practice of self-government that involves both conflict and cooperation require a more careful balance of affective weaponry and reflective and thoughtful tools?

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND THE RHIZOMATIC PUBLIC SPHERE

Unfortunately, this rhetoric of war machines and weaponry creeps into Connolly’s liberal micropolitics. “A counter-machine must be forged” (2008, 15). Despite appearances otherwise, Connolly’s micropolitics is one of affective war machines at battle. “Resonance” replaces “war,” however, as the relevant adjective. A machine resonates if it has the capacity to infiltrate existing orders of power and desire, reshape patterns of perception and self-understanding, and forge new connections between spiritualities and sensibilities of people holding differing doctrines or creeds. A conservative media apparatus that forges impassioned alliances between disempowered workers and the corporate elites that continue to disempower them as partners by enacting a shared faith in the redemptive force of capitalism provides just one example of this kind of resonance. While he shies away from Deleuze and Guattari’s bellicose language, Connolly’s response to this micropolitics of the right that foments division and distrust is the construction of new resonance or war machines that he calls “countertechniques of cultural-corporeal infusion” (2006, 74). New media countertechniques
that speak to the visceral register provide the resources to create resonances between the disparate interests of a fractured left and, perhaps, less punitive and more tolerant factions of the evangelical movement as well. New resonance machines are the key to a new coalition politics on the left, not bound by any singular or united cause or mission. And the means of producing this new coalition is by infiltrating public culture and planting the seeds of a new, generous yet critical ethos or sensibility. Working to force a “counter-resonance machine” requires what Connolly calls “the active coding of an ethos of presumptive generosity into the institutional practice of each creed” (2008, 58). Part of such an agenda, the part Connolly most often foregrounds, is the individual self-work of cultivating such a sensibility. But telling his audience to adopt a self-imposed regime of virtue ethics amounts to preaching to the converted. More important for Connolly then are tactics of actively visualizing a more generous ethos in public life and promoting it through new countertechniques of “corporeal-cultural infusion.” Creating new venues for the critical use of public reason may serve a role in the work of exposing and challenging existing practices of manipulation, but, as we’ve seen, deliberative intellectualism is insufficient to this task of “cultural-corporeal infusion.” The demand that public persuasion can provide an alternative to the powerful micropolitics of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine is a dead end. Political struggle, on this view, takes place at the level of intensities, not concepts.

What Connolly’s suggested alternative amounts to is ambiguous. While he points to Fox News and other egregious sources of public misinformation as examples of how the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine effectively works on the visceral register, he does not seem to insinuate that the left should begin producing such programs of its own. Rather, Connolly’s positive examples are sparse and few between. In one place he points to the importance parody news shows like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report in publicizing and critiquing the manipulation and fear mongering engaged in by mainstream news providers (2006, 74). In other places, he reflects on the art of writing (2002, chap. 3). And still elsewhere, he provides a broad list of popular films that he thinks stand as good examples of how citizens can experiment with new techniques of perception and experience (2002; 2008, 63–66). Following Deleuze’s reflections on film, Connolly argues that film provides a set of techniques with which “to recode our subliminal lives,” opening us up in an affirmative way, rather than a resentful one, to the contingency, vitalism, and pluralism of the world (2008, 65). He writes,
Films, unlike the written word, mix image, music, rhythm, plot, words, and background sounds, mimicking the processes by which our initial orientations to being were formed. “Belief” now touches, for instance, the tightening of the gut, coldness of the skin, contraction of the pupils, and hunching of the back that arise when an epistemic belief in which you are invested has been challenged. It also touches the tacit feeling of vitality that flows through life when you are attached to the world. (2008, 65)

The question is whether this “recoding” power of film is simply a therapeutic self-help tool viewers are to enjoy in the privacy of their living rooms or whether it is meant to intimate the kinds of persuasive tactics that a leftist countermachine must arm itself with if it wants to regain lost ground against the calamitous convergence of neoconservativism and neoliberalism, which would turn it into a tool of manipulation. Connolly’s critique of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine, his framing of the power of media technologies, his bellicose metaphors of tactics, anonymous machines, war, and attack, and his denigration of reasoned argumentation all come together to suggest that he wants to argue that this opening up to contingency, pluralism, and vitalism needs to be imposed on the public but just can’t bring himself to swallow such a bitter pill.

Just as Deleuze and Guattari’s bellicose language ought to raise questions as to what extent their vision of politics can properly be called liberal or democratic, so Connolly’s leanings toward a politics of visceral manipulation should occasion similar worries. Connolly’s project seems to become one of devising techniques through which to “instill” this ethos into the larger political culture that favors consciousness-subverting rather than consciousness-raising critique. But once the political stakes have been depicted in such terms—as the battle between the warring resonance machines over the visceral registers of the nation—what’s left to this theory that makes it a specifically democratic one? What makes Connolly’s ends any nobler than those he seeks to unmask and displace? Why is a generous ethos more desirable than a stingy, conservative one, or is the dichotomy between the two a forced one that pushes out other possibilities?

Connolly is aware of the dangers of manipulation and acknowledges that “this is dangerous territory. But it is also unavoidable territory in a media-rich world, in which there is never a vacuum in the micropolitics of corporeal-cultural infusion” (2006, 74). That said, however, Connolly never faces the challenge of manipulation head on. Rather, he attempts
to sidestep the issue with the claim that the media creates resonance by exploiting already existing dispositions to resentment or generosity in civil society (2008, 53, 56). Yet this answer does a disservice to his best insight that the resonance machine functions, as it did in the build-up to the Iraq invasion, by turning these punitive dispositions into sources of legitimation for concrete courses of action and policy. In retrospect many of those Americans who supported the initial invasion can now say that they were subject to a campaign of systematic misinformation and intimidation that manipulated their fears and distorted their exercise of judgment. In the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, Americans were subject to manipulation by the state, the military, and the media, plain and simple. But once this is acknowledged, it is that much more difficult to say that the practices of media coding that Connolly identifies and unfortunately champions are something entirely distinct. The best way for Connolly to distinguish his proposed media micropolitics from the cases of right-wing manipulation he identifies could be to fall back on an old tool of ideology critique, namely, the claim that his approach is not manipulative because a more generous ethos represents the true interests of the American public. The failure of citizens to acknowledge that presumptive generosity represents their true interest is simply a manifestation of the ideological distortion caused by the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine. But with this answer Connolly would avoid the charge of manipulation only to fall subject to the charge of paternalism. In both cases, respect for the agency of ordinary people to order their political lives in an autonomous fashion is denied.

But is this impasse unavoidable? If democratic politics today cannot but degenerate into a game of manipulation and countermanipulation so much the worse for all of us. However, we are only faced with this bleak scenario if the potential of deliberative democracy are jettisoned in all too quick a fashion. A sociologically complex account of communicative reason can provide an alternative route out of this situation.

It is important here to stress what a critical theory of deliberative democracy is not. It is not the gentlemanly sport of cool, calm, and dispassionate exchange of impartial reasons. It does not depend on the knockdown force of the better argument in a single-round, one-on-one, face-to-face bout of verbal jousting. It is not the reduction of political debate to a matter of logical demonstration. And it is not a clinical exercise wherein citizens are extracted from their concrete political world and placed in an artificially domination-free space of the ideal speech situation or deliberative focus group. All of these proposals, not to mention...
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others, have been put forward in one form or another under the banner of deliberative democracy. If theories of deliberative democracy were limited to these options, Connolly would be right to charge them with an intellectualism that ignores the vagaries of lived political praxis. However, a critical theory of deliberative democracy provides both an alternative to this deliberative intellectualism as well as to Connolly’s democratic deficit. The key to this alternative approach to democracy overlooked by both Connolly and these intellectualist theories of deliberation is the complex institution of the public sphere.

The public sphere is the decentered network of voluntary associations and media channels that crisscross civil society. It has no center or hub it radiates out of. Rather it is a rhizome in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the term: a multiplicity of lively points and intersections that hang together that lacks organization and is not subject to central control. Philippe Mengue makes just this point about the nature of the public sphere when he criticizes Deleuze and Guattari’s antipathy toward the idea of politics as the expression and contestation of public reasons. The public sphere, as he rightly notes, is precisely the kind of deterritorialized plane where movement and becoming can occur. Deliberative democracy is a model of democracy that explains how ideas circulate in such a public sphere; that is, how they bump into other ideas, transform them, and become transformed themselves in turn. Key to a critical theory of deliberative democracy is the claim that the exchange of reasons within this rhizomatic public sphere is what Jürgen Habermas calls “subjectless” (1996, 299). A public sphere is always more than the prudential exchange of reasons between two parties, but it is also always less than a self-reflection of a macrosubject capable of action. Rather, it is a complex mediating institution that allows ideas and reasons to become public—that is, it circulates and distributes reasons and ideas beyond the bounds of local conversations, turning them into resources to be drawn on, tested, and sometimes rejected in more local exercises of reason giving.

Crucially, the reasons that do all this circulating in the public sphere must be understood in an expansive sense. At the level of democratic theory, no one form of discourse has a monopoly on what counts as a reason. Deliberative democracy recognizes diverse forms of communication as reason giving, including storytelling, rhetoric, and greeting. Each has a place in a deliberative politics insofar as it is capable of drawing a connection between a particular claim or experience and a more general and accessible norm (Young 2000, 52–80; Dryzek 2000, 57–80). A public reason is
always a reason for doing or avoiding doing something. First-person stories like those W. E. B. Du Bois tells in *The Souls of Black Folk* are vivid depictions of the experience of racial oppression, but they function as reasons to a nonblack audience insofar as they aim to open the eyes of white America to the complacency of its commitments to liberty and equality. A public sphere is a site where these sorts of reasons are articulated and take on broader and richer meanings, as they are received by an indefinite audience of strangers.19

The informal and diffuse network of information that spans from labor meetings to church groups to book clubs to blogs to newspapers to PTA meetings and to dissident groups carries our reasons across multiple testing sites where they are subject to uptake, rejection, or transformation, only to be recirculated again. This public exchange of reasons has the important epistemic function of improving the quality of the reasons we use to justify our interests and decisions, but the more crucial function is its critical one. The articulation and contestation of reasons in the public sphere is a motor for self-reflection. It is this function, the self-critical and self-reflection function of exposure to diverse and impersonal reasons in a public sphere, that deliberative democracy values. While the media-saturated public sphere trades in low-involvement advertising and affective manipulation, it also and more importantly can be a means of provoking us to reflect on our received identities and interests.20 These epistemic and critical functions of the public sphere come together to provide a democratic resource for inciting self- and collective transformation in novel and potentially emancipatory ways. Seen as a molecular interplay of constantly flowing, shifting, and transforming reasons and self-understandings that provokes new and creative (but reflective) becomings that help us cope with the challenges of political community, the circulation of ordinary talk in the public sphere is Deleuzian. The public sphere is an example of micropolitics par excellence.

Once we introduce this institution of the public sphere into the discussion, we avail ourselves of a democratic alternative to Connolly’s politics of “cultural-corporeal infusion.” The task of generating resonance for a leftist politics can be divorced from the idea of manipulating visceral responses in favor of a politics that experiments with how *reasons* resonate in the public sphere, that is, with how they might function to provoke self-reflection. Reasons resonate when they make some claim on the moral and conceptual imaginary of their audience. That is to say, their resonance is not a feature of their logical structure but rather of the receptivity of the audience to them. A reason resonates when its audience considers it what William
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James called a “live” hypothesis, “one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed” (1967, 717).

Making reasons resonate, however, is the task of activists and social movements who introduce new concerns to the public sphere and redescribe acceptable existing practices as oppressive and harmful. To this end, an egalitarian and inclusive public sphere requires the insurgent work of its voluntary associations in the form of “deliberative enclaves” (Mansbridge 1999) or “counterpublics” (Fraser 1992) where dissidents, interests groups, social movements, and the oppressed experiment with novel discourses and redescriptions of the status quo to introduce into the public sphere’s circulation. When these experiments in consciousness-raising are successful, as with the feminist movement’s introduction of “date rape,” the queer movement’s turn away from civil unions in favor or “gay marriage” and Stephen Colbert’s introduction of “truthiness” into the American political lexicon, the terms of resonance in the public sphere change. Coining terms like “gay marriage” is not the same thing as institutionalizing it, but it does have the effect of redefining the terms of public debate around a now resonant experience of exclusion that had hitherto been simply invisible or erroneously seen as harmless.

To put this in the language of Deleuze, deliberative redescription can function as a war machine. The experimenting with resonating reasons in a public on the part of activists is an exercise in “plugging in” a resonance machine into the public sphere. The transformative power of the resonance machine, understood as an inventive redescription of our received practices, has the power to transform the way citizens see their shared world, their own interests, and the suffering of others. The work of counterpublics is to “smooth” the striated space of public political culture so as to displace old prejudices and allow new identities and claims to flourish.

But if this is so, then deliberative democracy does not stop here. This “weaponry” of redescription is of value only insofar as it opens up conceptual spaces for reason giving. It is here, along this destratified plane, that citizens and spectators have to make use of what Deleuze calls “tools” to build up reasoned but revisable agreements about what causes to pursue, what practices to quash, or which candidates to elect or kick out. Indeed, the creative work of redescription is only the mise-en-scène of a democratic praxis through which ordinary people offer and contest what they think to be good arguments and reasons about political issues. It is only through the reflective pursuit of overlapping agreement that collective action becomes possible.
Once we see all this, that the modern public sphere is an indefinite sphere for the circulation and contestation of expansive reasons, we have grounds for questioning Connolly’s characterization of deliberative intellectualism. Recall that this claim is that deliberative democrats are captured by too narrow a vision of thought, one that makes no place for the visceral and affective registers of thinking. I want to turn this argument around and suggest that Connolly himself focuses too closely on the moral psychology of the individual citizen and does not give enough credence to the decentered institutional registers by which deliberative persuasion takes place. The public sphere serves as a mediating institution between the visceral and the conceptually articulate, the actual and the virtual.

Connolly describes the visceral register and the amygdala as inscribing cultural values and judgments directly into the “soft tissue” of thought. Connolly’s argument hinges on the claim that what the body remembers, in this visceral sense of proto-thoughts, is both distinct from and more concrete than the conceptually refined thinking of reasoned argumentation. But when this argument is refracted through a critical theory of the public sphere, the dichotomy between visceral and intellectual he introduces falls flat. Of course the limbic system and even the stomach can be said to learn cultural codes, discourses, and symbolic orders. Yet these codes and discourses are themselves primarily linguistic orders that circulate at the level of reasons and understandings in the public sphere. They are precisely the sorts of discourses that circulate in the public sphere and are thus subject to its rationalizing, radicalizing, and democratizing power. While you cannot argue with the disgust you feel in your stomach directly, the kinds of understandings that provoke that disgust are part of a lifeworld that reproduces itself through the exchange of reasons. For example, the relatively recent transformation in the popular perception of smoking from something innocuous to something disgusting over is a clear example of how the publicization of reasons to avoid smoking, combined with cultural practices that reflect and rearticulate these reasons (bans on smoking indoors, more explicit warnings about health costs, etc.), feed back into the visceral judgments about its value. It is at the level critical publicity, not visceral manipulation alone, that these discourses are challenged and transformed.

**Negotiation**

Tactics and techniques alone are insufficient for reinvigorating democracy in our late-modern world. Cooperation, deliberation, and collective action are needed first and foremost. But does Connolly really frame the
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distinction between the two in such stark terms? Surely this way of putting
the point must overstate the case. As I have mentioned, he issues a number
of caveats that stress that he is not to be taken as suggesting that he sees no
value in deliberation or public reason. As we have also seen, however, the
power of dialogue and mutual understanding can have little place in his
vision of politics owing his critique of intellectualism and his Deleuzian
micropolitics. He foregrounds the multiple registers of thinking, an ethics
of self-care, and a micropolitics of manipulation, all the while downplaying
the issues of the public sphere, publicity, and political dialogue. But there is
another theme lurking in the background of Connolly’s texts. Behind the
celebration of ethics and micropolitics there are vague but regular appeals
to another ingredient in his ethos of pluralism. It is something he refers to,
all too in often in passing, as negotiation (1999, 35, 92, 143, 186; 2002, 138;
2005, 65, 123–26).21

An ethos of pluralism may come about through tactical interventions
into the visceral but also through a modus vivendi negotiated between
interdependent parties who honor different “final moral sources.” In
negotiation, the parties bring their comprehensive conceptions to bear
on issues of political disagreement. According to Connolly, negotiation
is a conception of political dialogue that abstains from hiding behind
a privileged Kantian account of right that magically floats above the
messy world of competing conceptions of the good. Rather, it takes place
between the unavoidable conceptions of the good that citizens bring to
politics. This thick negotiation means that deeply held convictions about
religion, the good, and so on are put on the table and are opened up to the
scrutiny and critique of others. To endure the agon of opening oneself up
in this way, all parties need to acknowledge the “comparative contestabil-
ity” of their fundaments; that is, citizens need to acknowledge that their
conception of the good is just one among others and that they have no
special privilege or insight that would make it right for them to impose
their understanding of the good on others (1999, 8). Trying to reach some
understanding across these differences, in a situation in which the inter-
dependence of identities and interests is not something abstracted from
deliberation but the very substance of it, is the hard work of an agonistic
democratic politics. Shared understandings or consensus are of course
not the likely outcome of this sort of negotiation, but good negotiation
will make for revised self-understandings and maybe even some sort of
self-transformation of the participants involved. Good negotiation, as
Connolly calls it, shares information, challenges prejudices, and produces
a degree of mutual respect, or rather an affirmation of “comparative contestability,” when agreement is not possible. That is, good negotiation is good deliberation.

Rereading his comments on resonance machines from the perspective of his comments on negotiation gives a different impression of how Connolly thinks a transformative democratic politics ought to function. That is, folding the politics of affective infusion into an agonistic but respectful process of negotiation begins to look a lot more like the descriptive politics of the public sphere proposed by deliberative democracy. The generous ethos of public engagement Connolly champions as negotiation, then, appears to be an instance of deliberative democracy, not an alternative or even a supplement to it. However, his account of negotiation is incomplete as it stands. Connolly's negotiation captures the normative concerns of deliberative democracy but lacks the accompanying explanatory function of a critical theory of deliberative democracy. Where are the fora of this negotiation if not in the public sphere, and how do these moments of responsive negotiation add up to displace the stingy sensibility that has puts a strangle hold on a more civil and egalitarian public ethos? Without a revised account of how negotiation contributes to a democratic public sphere—through participating in it, drawing on it as a resource, transforming its subjectless claims, and being transformed by them in turn—negotiation lacks the critical resources to mobilize a democratic left today.

Torn between the adversarial and manipulative politics of war machines on one side and an ethically sensitive negotiation that seeks understandings and mutual respect on the other, Connolly's recipe for a democratic reinvigoration of the left oscillates back and forth between a worrisome politics that would subvert popular reflection and a dialogical art that would provoke it. A critical theory of the public sphere, however, closes this gap and finds room for both power and legitimacy, strategy and communication, within a sociologically complex defense of a radical alternative: deliberative democracy.

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NOTES

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1. More refined versions of these objections have been voiced in Honig 2007, Mouffe 2000, Walzer 1999, Fish 1999, Sanders 1997, and Young 1996.

2. Duncan Ivison (2002) points to the contribution Connolly’s theory of the virtual register has to offer to a theory of public reason. In this article, I make the converse claim that a critical theory of deliberative democracy provides the best theoretical framework for thinking through the implications of Connolly’s thought—despite his own claims to the contrary.

3. Other notable contributions to this trend come from George Lakoff (2002) and Leslie Thiele (2006). For a critical review of this trend and of the dangers of theory’s seduction by scientific naturalism in general, see Gunnell 2007.


5. Despite his proclaimed naturalism, Connolly provides a surprisingly constructivist understanding of disgust that gives its biological and evolutionary aspects fairly short shrift. The result is that, as Gunnell points out, there is a disconnect between Connolly’s claims about culture and physiology that his vague account about “networks” passes over too quickly (Gunnell 2007, 709). For a richer and more nuanced account of disgust that is more attentive to the overlaps and dissonances between its perceptual, physiological, evolutionary, and cultural elements, see Miller 1997.

6. For a physiological version of this argument, see LeDoux 2002. For a more conceptual variant also drawing on cognitive science, see Lakoff and Johnson 1999.

7. Connolly 2008. An insightful alternative account of this recent collaboration of neoliberalism and neoconservativism in American politics is provided by Wendy Brown (2006). Brown argues that neoliberalism’s attack on the institutions and public culture of constitutional democracy creates the civic void that neoconservative ideology fills in. What is distinctive about Brown’s account is her argument that it is precisely the demise of deliberative self-governance, as well as the desire for it, in contemporary America that renders the whole situation a crisis of de-democratization.


9. See Gunnell 2007. This is not to suggest that Connolly is a strict Deleuzian in any sense of the term. Rather, Connolly’s self-professed “immanent naturalism” draws on an eclectic series of authors. Deleuze, however, has come to the foreground among them in recent years. Relying primarily on Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism and William James’s radical empiricism in recent works, Connolly has come to refer to his thinking, perhaps in jest, as “Jamesleuzian” (2008, 133).

10. Philippe Mengue (2003, 37–44) argues that at the core of Deleuze’s rejection of deliberative politics is a suspicion of popular opinion, and therefore participatory
dialogue, as something base and plebeian in comparison to the autonomy of philosophical “thinking.”

11. Which is to say that the nomadic use of the war machine that is reactive and oppositional is fundamentally different from the state usage of the war machine that functions precisely to maintain order and control. On the two dimensions of the war machine see Holland 2007.

12. In “How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?” Deleuze and Guattari provide a sustained account of enacting transformation that is generally more cautious and less bellicose than the discussion in the war machine plateau. That said, however, these parts of their text differ more in rhetorical style than in their substantive vision of politics. They advise: “We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. It is only there that the BwO [Body without Organs] reveals itself for what it is: connections of desires, conjunctions of flows, continuum of intensities. You have constructed your own little machine, ready when needed to be plugged into other collective machines” (1987, 161). Here the language is one of gently tipping rather than violent assault, but the idea of constructing your own little machine, a war machine, to destabilize and transform an existing social ordering of desire and power is the same.

13. Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that while the tool and the weapon are distinguished by their function, these categories are ambiguous and may find convergence in “a schizophrenic taste for the tool that moves it away from work and toward free action, a schizophrenic taste for the weapon that turns it into a means for peace, for obtaining peace” (1987, 403). Unfortunately, the only examples they offer of such a mutation are peasants who use agricultural tools for violent purposes and the Marxist longing for a proletariat class that might enact radical social change (1987, 402–3).

14. The shortcomings of Connolly’s turn to personal ethics as a solution to politics is clearly articulated in Krause 2006.


16. I am here drawing on the distinction between democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy proposed in Chambers 2009.


18. Mengue does not mention the public sphere directly but instead refers of the democratic exchange of public opinion as constituting a “plan d’immanence doxique” (2003, 52–54).


20. Saying this, however, is not the same thing as saying that public deliberation will always lead to self-reflection or even lead to very deep revision of existing preferences. However, the persuasive claim of the impersonal reasons that might be said to constitute the
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public realm on us is not limited to their singular encounter but rather to their persistence in the public discourse. On the limits of deliberative faith in transformation, see Forst 2001.

21. It is perhaps noteworthy that this line of argument has been dropped entirely in his book, Capitalism and Christianity.

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