

Overview

My scholarly work presupposes that democracy can nurture possibilities for individuals and communities to live ethically, responsibly, and justly. I do not make this claim unproblematically, but I want to emphasize at the outset that I am a democratic optimist. That said, I am an anxious optimist. Democracy holds great promise, but all politics is essentially a struggle among interests, ideas, and beliefs, and the results of this struggle are not always ethical, responsible, or just. For me, then, normative democratic political theory should seek to nurture democratic politics with a watchful eye to the unethical, irresponsible, and unjust politics that is always a possibility.

Of most interest to me are questions about political membership and agency in democratic communities. These questions are at the core of everyday political struggles, so my work is typically situated in contemporary political debates. Methodologically, my graduate studies at Duke University included explorations of a wide range of political questions, periods of political thought, and approaches to normative political inquiry. This has given me a well-developed foundation upon which to pursue questions of membership and agency. Perhaps more important, it has taught me that diverse perspectives are enriched by collegial but challenging dialogue with others. The projects that comprise my research agenda reflect these myriad approaches to questions of membership and agency in democratic politics.

Current projects

In recent years, education policy has been deeply influenced by a movement to restore civic aims (or to renew American character) in public school classrooms. This movement raises a significant normative question for any community: how should education further our civic aspirations? This question motivated my dissertation project, *Reclaiming Education: Conserving for a Radical Politics*, which explores the relationship between education and democratic agency. Of course, the answer to this question depends profoundly on how one theorizes democracy itself. I begin from a radical democratic perspective and ask: “how should democratic education be undertaken for a radical democratic politics?” I argue that K-12 democratic education has competing purposes: it should inspire democratic activism in future citizens, but it should also protect them from the dangers of contemporary politics. Paradoxically, it has a political objective but must try to remain de-politicized. I articulate a theory of democratic education that takes these competing purposes seriously by aspiring to a certain kind of conservatism (one that seeks to conserve radical democratic possibility). I argue that democratic education should not radically reject all traditions, but should rest on traditions that do not preclude democratic radicalism.

FIX TO REFLECT REVISED ARTICLE One part of this project, an article entitled “Uncontented characters: Re-imagining education for democratic practices” (currently under review at *Review of Politics*), appropriates Aristotle’s notion of *ethos* for democratic education. *Ethos* is an education via practice within a community (and its traditions). These practices are not intended, however, to force students into the mold of ideal citizenship. Because an idealized and unitary approach to character education leads to normalization or standardization and may threaten democracies by undermining the plurality that makes deliberation meaningful and effective, I argue that democratic citizens should be tended, rather than intended; nurtured, rather than determined or shaped. There is some slippage between these two possibilities, of course, and one cannot draw a sharp distinction between traditions as things *to be practiced* by students within community and traditions as things that *are imparted* onto a student. Even so, in the latter

case, tradition becomes a means to mold future citizens in the image of the community's past; this threatens to become indoctrination, rather than education for democratic citizenship. In the former, tradition is honored, but as a root for an (as yet) indiscernible democratic future, and as a way to nurture a student's capacity for radical democratic agency when s/he becomes a citizen.

My current project on the relationship between authority and democracy also has roots in my dissertation. The goal of this essay is to raise the question "what kind of authority is compatible with democracy?" After all, democratic societies (like all societies) depend on certain kinds of authority, like the authority of parents over children and teachers over students. We might conclude that these kinds of authority are acceptable because they are only temporary and because (usually) authority figures act in the best interests of children who are not yet fully developed. But they are also problematic when "authority" turns tyrannical and students or children lose their capacities to engage in democratic politics. I argue that democratic theorists can reclaim a notion of authority that, while in some important senses is undemocratic (because it depends upon hierarchy, because it represents a closure of dialogue and deliberation, and because it requires that adherents relinquish their autonomy), can nevertheless enhance democracy, dignity, and capacities for action. I suggest that this is possible if authority for democracy is theorized as a kind of "first principle" that provides grounding for action (and that overcomes the potentially infinite regression of deliberative argument). I also suggest that, while authority can be dangerous for democracy, there may be some conditions under which authority can be generative of it instead. This kind of authority would exist when recognition of the political equality (i.e. equal rights) of the authority figure and the adherents exist, when the authority figure pursues her own obsolescence as an authority figure, and when authority figures and adherents share relations of care. I believe that this project can help democratic theorists reclaim authority as a constitutive element of democratic politics.

Research horizons

As I mentioned in my cover letter, I plan to undertake this study as a book-length project. While the article will clarify my view of how authority can facilitate democratic engagement, the book will investigate authority in republican, liberal and democratic thought and how (or whether) contemporary variants of these schools of thought invoke a conception of authority. I have lofty ambitions for this project. I am convinced that theorists have largely left aside the question of authority because they presume that authority and legitimacy are synonymous. This view presumes that most human relations are rooted in conscious consent, a claim that social theorists like Foucault and Bourdieu rightly problematize. Citizens appeal to authority and acquiesce to it all the time. They do so consciously and, perhaps, unconsciously. Thus the presence of authority in democracies poses a difficult problem for democratic theorists if authority results in an all-too-easy acquiescence to another's will. This project seeks to revive interest in a topic that has received insufficient attention in contemporary democratic political theory but that undoubtedly has profound ramifications for theories of democratic agency.

I will also pursue a co-authored project that reflects, in different ways, my persistent interest in membership and agency in democratic politics. I am developing a project with a colleague from Duke about adult immigrant education in the U.S. that began in a conversation about how immigrants should learn to fit into the American community. This project explores assimilation, indoctrination, education, political socialization, and citizenship from normative and empirical perspectives. It is rooted in the democratic education literature I understand well, but takes on unique dimensions because it concerns documented and undocumented adults (rather than children), and because it concerns individuals who arrive in the U.S. already having developed relationships with political institutions in their countries of origin that will invariably shape how they respond to political institutions here. My colleague brings his knowledge of immigration,

public opinion, and race/ethnic politics to bear on this project. In this project we will explore normative questions about what kinds of citizen education are appropriate (and to what extent this education should be assimilative). We will also explore empirical questions about how citizens in the U.S. will respond to these efforts (i.e. would they prefer that immigrants assimilate to core American values or would such efforts bring nationalistic attitudes to the forefront of debates about immigration?). Given the persistent immigration debate, these are important normative and practical questions about membership and agency in American politics. Because it is so timely and so complex, I believe that this project will result in a few articles and, eventually, a book manuscript.

Finally, one other (article-length) project will reflect on the relationships between members (and non-members) of democratic communities. James Baldwin invokes “political love” as a way to respond to exclusivity in democratic communities. In comparison, Hannah Arendt avers that love belongs in the private realm and has no place in politics, but she also invokes *amor mundi*, a kind of public love that must also be characterized by agonism. How does agonism relate to political love, particularly given the conditions of political exclusivity that Baldwin is addressing? Baldwin’s conception of a “political” kind of love puts interesting pressures on agonistic conceptions of democratic politics. Does it also reveal something about intimacy in democratic politics that Arendt’s public/private distinction obscures? With this project, I will undertake a comparison of Arendt and Baldwin that will enable a broader reflection on the relationship between agonism, (political) intimacy, membership, and the possibility of political love.

These projects reflect the kind of scholar I am and aspire to be; I work hard and care deeply about the issues I study. I am also open to different challenges, approaches, ideas, and literatures that might help broaden my understanding of democratic theory. And while these projects are diverse and demanding enough to keep me engaged in research for the next several months and years, they will almost certainly open up new questions for the future.