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Agonism and pluralism

Abstract This paper assesses the claim that an agonistic model of democracy could foster greater accommodation of citizens' social, cultural and ethical differences than mainstream liberal theories. I address arguments in favor of agonistic conceptions of politics by a diverse group of democratic theorists, ranging from republican theorists – Hannah Arendt and Benjamin Barber – to postmodern democrats concerned with questions of identity and difference, such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig. Neither Arendt's democratic agonism nor Barber's republican-inflected account of strong democracy purports to include citizens' group-based cultural identities, and so cannot further the claim that agonistic politics is more inclusive of cultural and social differences. Postmodern agonistic democrats such as Connolly and Honig rely upon Arendt's account of the relationship between agonism and pluralism, and wrongly assume that her view of politics is compatible with formal respect and recognition for citizens' cultural group identities. While agonistic democracy helpfully directs us to attend to the importance of moral and political disagreement, I argue that the stronger claim that an agonistic model of democracy could more readily include culturally diverse citizens is simply unfounded. By contrast, recent liberal variants of agonistic democracy that conceive of legal and political institutions as tools for recognizing and mediating citizens' moral and cultural differences may suggest ways to deepen our democratic practices in plural societies.

Key words   agonism · agonistic democracy · Hannah Arendt · citizenship · cultural minorities · pluralism · republican theory

Introduction

Recent contractarians claim that the task of liberalism is to identify minimal political norms and principles that diverse citizens of liberal democratic states could or do accept. In the view of neutral or political liberals such as John Rawls, a defensible liberal theory for plural societies is one that eschews norms reflecting 'incompatible yet reasonable

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comprehensive doctrines of a moral and religious character'.[1] Political liberals make the further and more controversial claim that in order to secure wide agreement on minimal political norms and institutions, citizens must bracket their particular social, moral and religious beliefs when deliberating upon 'constitutional essentials', or upon basic political principles and structures; as Rawls writes, 'faced with the fact of reasonable pluralism, a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation'.[2] Not surprisingly, political liberals have come under criticism both for proposing that citizens should bracket their comprehensive views when discussing political norms and institutions and for assuming that democratic politics should seek to minimize citizens' normative disagreements in the first place. Among the most vociferous critics are proponents of 'agonistic' conceptions of democracy,[3] whose central claim seems to reduce to the view that moral conflict is a valuable and indispensable part of political life. Far from urging citizens to set aside their moral, religious and cultural perspectives, agonistic democrats suggest that we should seek to develop and extend political practices which facilitate the expression of citizens' disagreements. For some, this emerges as a call to retrieve aspects of classical and republican models of political life. For others, liberalism's apparent failure to accommodate greater disagreement in political life evinces the need to take serious account of postmodern insights on truth, meaning and identity, all of which reveal the folly of liberals' longing for politically 'neutral' institutions and principles. Above all, agonistic democrats urge us to abandon strong norms of political agreement, rational dialogue and ideal consensus in political life.

Instead of encouraging citizens to bracket their moral and cultural disagreements, agonistic democrats suggest that we cultivate oppositional yet respectful civic and political relations and practices. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that these writers claim that their approach to politics could foster greater respect for, and inclusion of, citizens' moral, social and cultural differences in democratic life.[4] Unlike contractarian liberal theories, agonistic democracy, so its defenders argue, does not presuppose norms of rational dialogue, neutral justification, or political consensus, nor does it seek to minimize citizens' ethical differences; rather, it takes disagreement as the natural starting-point for much political debate (and not merely in culturally plural societies). Beyond rejecting norms of neutrality and consensus, agonistic democrats suggest that citizens' active political participation is an indispensable feature of democratic life, for it makes possible the direct, egalitarian expression of their diverse views and beliefs. For these and other reasons, they claim that an agonistic conception of politics offers a better framework for the expression and communication of citizens' differences than dominant liberal models of politics.

The claim that agonistic democracy could foster greater accommodation of and respect for citizens' cultural and ethical differences than prevailing liberal theories is well worth assessing. I address writings by a range of democratic theorists who endorse agonistic conceptions of politics, ranging from republican theorists – Hannah Arendt and Benjamin Barber – to postmodern democrats concerned with questions of identity and difference, such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig. I also touch upon the thought of democratic theorists of citizenship who incorporate aspects of republican theory into their accounts of a pluralistic and dynamic public sphere, such as David Miller and Chantal Mouffe. I begin by offering an overview of agonistic democracy and the positions held by some of the significant contemporary writers working in this vein. Next I address Arendt's conceptions of action and plurality, with a view to demonstrating the limitations of her thought for an agonistic theory of democracy. Following this, I examine two recent republican approaches that incorporate agonistic democratic ideals – Barber's politics of 'strong democracy' and Miller's pluralistic account of republican citizenship. This leads to a critical assessment of postmodern variants of agonism, as put forth by Connolly and Honig. Finally, I argue that to be of any use, agonistic democracy needs to keep a safe distance from certain excesses of Arendtian agonism and instead link up with prudential and pragmatic theories of politics. While agonistic approaches to politics direct us to attend to the power and importance of moral and political disagreement, I conclude that the stronger claim that it could more readily foster the inclusion of citizens' moral, cultural and ethical differences is simply unfounded.

Defining agonistic democracy

Proponents of agonistic democracy insist that political conflict and disagreement are endemic to political life and cannot be resolved by appeals to rationality or to allegedly shared intuitions about justice. On their view, this conflictual or oppositional aspect of politics is not merely an unavoidable but regrettable condition to be mediated and ultimately minimized through endless bargaining; rather, the expressive and dynamic dimension of political agency – our disagreements and conflicts – is the very essence of the polis and citizenship. Contemporary theorists whose work endorses some version of agonistic democracy include Barber, Connolly, Honig, Mouffe and John Gray, amongst others. These writers look variously to such thinkers as Aristotle, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Arendt and Carl Schmitt in arguing for a more robust democratic politics. While I will not discuss all variants of agonistic democracy here, it is worth noting that they range from conservative republican

doctrines (e.g. such as that espoused by Michael Oakeshott) to left-leaning accounts of republican citizenship sensitive to the realities of pluralism (e.g. the writings of Miller and Mouffe) and postmodern accounts of the relevance of identity and difference to politics (e.g. the arguments of Connolly and Honig).

Agonistic democrats' strongest disagreements both with mainstream liberals and with some proponents of deliberative democracy center on questions about the *nature* and telos of politics: whereas for many liberals and deliberative democrats, politics should either be consensus-directed or aim for a *modus vivendi*, proponents of agonistic democracy, as noted above, view conflict as central to politics and reject purely juridical or procedural forms of justice. The contractarian liberal view (as expressed by Rawls, Bruce Ackerman and Charles Larmore) that consensus on political principles must be secured in some sense *in advance* of politics is equally antithetical to agonistic democracy. Beyond criticizing liberals' efforts to keep morally and politically divisive topics off the political agenda, they are skeptical of the idealized conceptions of rationality and discourse characteristic of procedural and deliberative theories of liberal democracy.

Proponents of agonism also emphasize the need to rethink *citizenship* in liberal democratic states so as to permit a wider range of ethical differences to emerge in the course of political dialogue and debate. The basis for certain agonistic accounts of citizenship is a particular republican ideal, which, as Miller suggests, 'conceives the citizen as someone who plays an active role in shaping the future direction of his or her society through political debate and decision-making'.[5] Of course, republican theorists do not necessarily agree on a single account of citizenship; for instance, Barber, following Rousseau, rejects the very idea of representation in politics as a mere substitute for direct democracy. But proponents of agonistic politics share with republican thinkers the view that there should be 'no limits on what sort of demands may be put forward in the political forum', and that 'it should be part of each person's good to be engaged at some level in political debate, so that the laws and policies of the state do not appear to him or her simply as alien impositions but as the outcome of a reasonable agreement to which he or she has been party'.[6] Agonistic democracy and republicanism are, however, disanalogous in at least one important respect: where the Renaissance republican ideal of the polis as the center of public life seems to presuppose a common conception of the good and a unified political community, agonistic democracy does not. Agonism, so say its defenders, neither presupposes nor aspires to build a fully cohesive ethical or political community bound by common moral or rational intuitions and beliefs.

Though agonistic democracy need not emphasize moral cohesiveness

and active citizenship to the extent insisted upon by some classical republican thinkers, many of its proponents look to an older tradition of citizenship that pre-dates Enlightenment thought. These agonistic democrats draw on the classical and Renaissance view of the citizen as an active political *agent* rather than (as later, early modern and modern liberal views have it) a political *subject* – or what Quentin Skinner has called a mere 'bearer of rights' and 'consumer of government'.[7] They also call for the proliferation of public spaces to increase citizens' direct participation in political life, and for the cultivation of a political culture that is dynamic and open, rather than juridical and procedural. It is just these sorts of appeals to retrieve republican political practices that have led Mouffe to anticipate 'the return of the political'.[8]

Several weaknesses of agonistic accounts of politics are apparent even from this brief description. First, it is not clear whether and in what ways existing liberal institutions fail to permit the expression and communication of citizens' ethical and cultural differences in political life. While this allegation may be true of some variants of liberalism, much current liberal theory and not a few liberal institutions strive to grapple with dilemmas of moral and cultural diversity; as such, it is not immediately clear what agonistic democracy can supply that a revised liberalism cannot. Second, an agonistic conception of politics presupposes that most citizens have or can come to have political views and interests that they want to press in the public realm. This perspective cannot readily account for those who opt for a life of passive citizenship, outside the realm of mainstream political activity. Consider, for instance, the case of certain cultural, ethnic, or religious minority communities who do not see politics as central to their account of the good life. Third, agonistic democrats have so far had little to say about citizens who may refuse to cooperate with other citizens, or about groups that have an entrenched interest in having a conflict continue unresolved. These are difficult cases, meriting special political measures to compel agreement, rather than more talk: consider the situation of a community that has decided to live separately from the rest of society, and the case of an ethnic group whose sole goal is that of political secession.[9]

Beyond these weaknesses, agonistic democrats oftentimes fail to explain why and in what ways conflict is necessarily a sign of a robust, democratic system of government. Increasingly, this claim seems to rely upon a further assumption, namely, that an agonistic politics fosters respect for ethical and cultural differences (an assumption that informs much recent postmodern writing on agonism and diversity). But as I shall argue, agonistic democrats have done little to defend the link between agonism and greater respect for citizens' moral, religious and cultural differences.[10]

Arendtian agonism: plurality, action, citizenship

Hannah Arendt's thought provides the main source for contemporary writers' claims about the affinity of agonism and pluralism. This is in part because she offers a rich account of personal and social identity that demonstrates how political action can shape citizens' identities, interests and commitments. Despite these insights, however, Arendt's theory is inherently limited in several respects, most importantly in the way in which she brackets our social and cultural characteristics and arrangements from her accounts of identity and plurality. These flaws are alternately overlooked and unwittingly reproduced by agonistic democrats who draw upon Arendt's thought.

Any inquiry into Arendt's concepts of identity and plurality must be prefaced by a discussion of her account of action, since for Arendt it is through action in the public realm that we constitute and reveal our unique identities. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes action as spontaneous, revelatory and exemplary of human initiative and power. She contrasts action with two other human capacities that she considers under the rubric of the *vita activa*: labor (represented by the category of the *animal laborans*) and work (carried out by *homo faber*). Arendt's view of action is unusual in part because she insists that action cannot occur *outside* the public realm: action is *intrinsically* public, for it requires an audience of spectators, or a political community of fellow (equal) citizens. On Arendt's view, action embodies human freedom; in contrast to labor (human effort directed towards sustaining and reproducing life on a basic level) and work (which, while productive and worthy, entails repetition and instrumental goals), action is the most noble and freeing activity to which human beings can aspire – 'the highest rank of the *vita activa*'.[11]

For Arendt, action is spontaneous and unpredictable, never routinized, sterile, or procedural; the capacity to act is 'the most dangerous of all human abilities and possibilities'.[12] Arendt offers the metaphor of *natality* to denote the regenerative quality and function of action. In contrast to the repetitiveness of labor and work, action exemplifies human initiative and power. Action is inherently public, and takes place in a collectivity: we act in a space of appearances, never alone.[13] Indeed, Arendt emphasizes that action 'always establishes relationships', or what she refers to as the 'web of relationships' or 'web of human affairs'.[14] Action also entails 'publicity', in the sense that our actions are observed and meet with responses in the public realm; it is for this reason that 'action without a name, a "who" attached to it, is meaningless'.[15] Thus action cannot characterize the private realm as Arendt understands it, for it cannot serve as a space of appearances in which we act and reveal our identities.

This brief account of Arendt's thinking on action brings into relief her rather unusual account of identity as dynamic, public, and yet highly individualistic in character. Action and speech have a *revelatory* role: it is the means through which our identities are constituted in the public realm, and our distinctness (in the sense of uniqueness and excellence) revealed. One of the most crucial goals of action is to reveal our personal uniqueness: 'Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others.'[16] The identities we constitute and reveal are constantly changing and evolving, and never fully revealed except after our deaths, as stories.[17] (Arendt draws an analogy between action and the performing arts, 'since all acting contains an element of virtuosity'.)[18] Such performances and achievements require speech, through which we make our uniqueness and intentions known to others.[19] Just as genuine political action is both non-instrumental and unpredictable for Arendt, so our identities are unpredictable and never fully known to our contemporaries or us. Instead of viewing identity as defined or fixed by ascriptive and involuntary characteristics and memberships, Arendt contends that our identities are fluid and unpredictable, and that they are shaped through action and speech.

The idea of *agonism* is central to Arendt's concepts of identity and plurality in a few respects. Agonism relates to Arendt's view of *power* as pervasive in all human interaction: power, viewed as the 'potentiality' latent in all intersubjective action, 'is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence'.[20] Identities are shaped agonistically in the public realm because we act and reveal our uniqueness within a context of human power and potentiality. Power, in turn, is coextensive with plurality: human multiplicity and distinctness are necessary conditions for power, just as power, or potentiality, is present wherever there is a plurality of individuals.[21] Public actors are caught up in an agonistic chain of actions and consequences that they can never abandon so long as they continue to engage in political life.[22]

To bring Arendt's accounts of politics and identity into clearer focus, and to lay the basis for my argument that Arendtian agonism does not gesture towards greater respect or recognition for members of cultural and social groups, it is essential to examine her notion of *plurality*. In its simplest sense, 'plurality' is for Arendt the basic condition of action, speech, thought and politics:

> Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics,

> this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the condition *sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.[23]

As we can see, on this definition, plurality is akin to the Aristotelian recognition that the presence of multiple, distinct persons is essential to political life, as reflected in Aristotle's claim that 'the state consists not merely of a plurality of men, but different kinds of men; you cannot make a state out of men who are all alike'.[24] Yet while both Arendt and Aristotle believe that polities necessarily include a multiplicity of persons, it is wrong to read into their notions of plurality the view that ascriptive and social differences are (or should be) central to citizens' identities.[25] Like Aristotle, Arendt does not attempt to connect people's ascriptive differences with their social and political identities and ends, much less suggest that these have a legitimate basis of expression within broader political institutions. Instead, for Arendt, plurality – like identity – denotes the essential uniqueness of persons as revealed by human agency. This account of plurality as individual uniqueness is a far cry from pluralism's recognition of the importance of cultural and social *group* identities to politics.[26]

Although Arendt sometimes uses 'distinctness' and 'difference' interchangeably, neither is meant to refer to the different ascriptive and social features of persons, such as race, gender and ethnicity. In this regard, postmodern proponents of agonistic democracy may be wrong to read these latter aspects of 'difference' into her notions of plurality and identity; Arendt hails distinctiveness, not social difference.[27] Far from endorsing a *normative* account of pluralism that considers ascriptive and social differences as valuable and worthy of moral and political respect, Arendt sets her conception of plurality apart from such concrete identities. Plurality is for Arendt individualistic and *descriptive*: it celebrates the multiplicity of distinct, individual persons and perspectives that follows from the dynamism and unpredictability of action. By contrast, some of the best available contemporary conceptions of *pluralism* are both descriptive and normative:[28] insofar as pluralism is also a normative and evaluative concept, it recognizes the moral, social and political significance of human diversity, and draws our attention to claims for recognition made by social and cultural groups.

This is not to diminish the value of Arendt's affirmation of human uniqueness and individual diversity. Nor should we overlook the importance of Arendt's vision of politics: because she conceives of identity as constituted in the public realm through action – and action in turn is conceived as spontaneous, as unpredictable and as entailing human initiative and virtuosity – Arendt can help us to see that citizens' contrasting judgments, opinions and standpoints are central to political life. Her thought shows us that in the absence of diverse perspectives,

views and opinions, no politics is possible. It is only 'by taking the viewpoints of others into account' that we may attain understanding and a critical distance from our own subjective ideas, or impartiality.[29]

At its best, Arendt's notion of plurality reaffirms and celebrates the fact that in any political community there is always a diversity of standpoints, opinions and judgments which emerge through action and the exercise of political judgment. Yet Arendt's peculiar brand of pluralism is ill-suited to the purported goals of agonistic democrats. Insofar as she was interested in understanding and explaining events that precipitated a crisis of faith in popular, but ultimately ineffective, notions of human rights and human nature, we should not be surprised that Arendt's account fails to address contemporary dilemmas of diversity satisfactorily.[30] As *The Origins of Totalitarianism* makes plain, Arendt was concerned to argue for a conception of basic political rights for all citizens that would be agnostic to social and cultural differences – differences which she saw as a basis (albeit an illegitimate one) for withholding such rights. This is why she insists that the opposite of natural inequality and 'mere givenness' is the condition of political equality: 'Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice.'[31] But while Arendt understandably warns us of a backlash against 'natural' differences among human beings,[32] she is equally eager to deny that social differences might be politically important in *legitimate* ways. At times, she appears reluctant to concede that social and cultural differences (especially in the absence of entrenched political rights) could represent anything *but* a threat to political equality and citizenship.[33]

Contemporary republican theories of agonism

Like Arendt, Benjamin Barber conceives of politics as a 'realm of action'.[34] Barber wants to reclaim democracy from the grip of juridical and procedural theories of liberalism, and to this end proposes a conception of 'strong democracy' that 'aspires to transform conflict through a politics of distinctive inventiveness and discovery'.[35] The reliance of contemporary liberal and discourse-ethical theories on 'formal reasoning and abstract principles' is misguided, in Barber's view; writers as diverse as Rawls, Nozick and Habermas invoke norms of rationality that are not in fact 'reasonable' or shared features of politics.[36] Barber suggests that democrats should instead focus on 'political *processes*' and the question of how to act in the face of disagreement and conflict; there can be no legitimate appeal to overarching truths, nor is there 'an independent ground for judgment' in politics.[37]

Whether or not Barber's claims about the futility of appeals to reason (he does not specify whether he means instrumental rationality, practical reason, or communicative rationality) in politics are fully warranted is not my main concern here. No doubt Barber is right to suggest that political theories that invoke idealized norms of rationality as constraints on political dialogue and deliberation face the challenge of demonstrating that all or most moral agents/citizens could indeed participate on the terms specified by those norms. And he is probably correct to suggest there are good reasons to identify the dynamics of actual conflicts, the capacities and motivations of political agents, and the limits of existing political institutions. Like Arendt, Barber takes us a certain distance in this project: he conceives of politics in terms of conflict and pluralism, and sees action, and the consequences of action, as the focus of political life.

Both Arendt and Barber believe that understanding politics in terms of the need for choice and action against a background of disagreement or even tragedy confers a responsibility on ordinary citizens to engage actively in politics. Citizens participation is crucial not only because it is the most democratic way to resolve conflicts, but equally because it helps to secure both individual and collective (or democratic) freedom. Yet while Arendt and Barber recognize the plurality of citizens' perspectives, neither seems to consider the ways in which citizens' social and cultural differences impact upon their commitments to civic activity and their styles of political deliberation. Just what is required by Arendt's and Barber's visions of active citizenship? Need everyone be equally active in politics? Is freedom possible only for active, deliberating citizens? And if so, what might this mean for culturally diverse communities, with contrasting expectations of politics and vastly different views about the proper relationship of public life to private and social beliefs?

A number of potential conflicts arise between Arendt's and Barber's ideal of the active, free citizen and the experiences of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities in pluralistic states. Both thinkers seem at times to fetishize the 'virtuosity' of the citizen, and link together political participation and freedom in problematic ways. Arendt laments the encroachment of the social realm, or 'realm of necessity', on 'the political realm, the only realm where men can truly be free'.[38] Barber's strong democracy 'envisions politics not as a way of life but as a way of living', and suggests that institutionalizing strong democracy 'requires unmediated self-government by an engaged citizenry'.[39] For instance, both Arendt's and Barber's conceptions of democracy require active civic engagement and 'self-representation', and fail to account for the importance of group-based forms of political participation and identity-based justice claims. Barber overlooks the reluctance of some ethnic, religious and national minorities to participate directly in mainstream politics in

democratic states. Such groups may well be marginalized from political life, but they may also choose not to participate because of cultural norms of privacy, or because they view religion as taking precedence over politics. Barber's view both overlooks such reluctance and the growing importance of cultural group-based politics, especially in states with national minorities.[40] Barber's specific political proposals also seem ill-suited to the goal of accommodating the concerns of minority cultural groups: he suggests that we replace liberal representative democracy – that is, 'unitary' or consensus-oriented democracy – with what he calls a 'strong' form of direct democracy, or a kind of 'participatory politics [which] deals with public disputes and conflicts of interest by subjecting them to a never-ending process of deliberation, decision, and action'.[41]

Barber's vision of strong democracy is vulnerable to at least two further criticisms from the vantage point of concerns about the accommodation of cultural minorities. First, in the absence of (either instrumental or communicative) norms of rationality to structure ideal political deliberation, strong democracy instead covertly presupposes the existence of a relatively cohesive moral community. That is, such a community is required in order to make possible the level of political participation and public-spiritedness he views as foundational to a more deeply democratic politics. And second, Barber's claim to offer 'a truly autonomous politics' – whereby 'the procedures of self-legislation and community-building on which [strong democracy] relies are . . . genuinely independent of external norms, prepolitical truths, or natural rights'[42] – conflicts with the hierarchy of norms and values implicit in Barber's conception of strong democracy. Like Arendt, Barber places a much higher premium on *political* as opposed to social, cultural and economic goods and activities; this is underlined most dramatically in Barber's insistence that the best way to resolve conflicting social and cultural commitments and identities in democratic states is to privilege the role of the *citizen*: 'to make the civic role sovereign over other forms of identity resolves the problem of the relationship of public to private.'[43] Apparently Barber (not unlike Arendt) takes a dim view of persons whose primary sense of identification derives from their religious, racial, ethnic, or cultural identities and memberships.

These criticisms ultimately issue in the charge that Barber's conception of politics cannot sustain group-based demands for cultural recognition. In response to this claim, Barber might take one of two possible routes. On the one hand, he could admit that strong democracy does *indeed* require a cohesive moral community, but indicate that this community is not given or 'discovered' but rather created through citizens' active participation. Indeed, Barber makes something like this assertion when he proclaims that 'the two terms participation and community are aspects of one single mode of social being: citizenship'.[44] As part of this

strategy, Barber would need further to admit that strong democracy presupposes a normative commitment to the value of political engagement; but since he is reluctant to admit that strong democracy embraces substantive normative positions, Barber instead treats civic participation as a good that no one could reasonably deny. Perhaps as a result, he neglects to defend his claim that citizens would commit themselves to a higher degree of political participation than is currently the case in democratic states. It is here that Barber's argument for strong democracy begins to break down. The 'constructed' political community that he defends requires that citizens value their civic role and the responsibilities of political participation above all private goods in advance of such participation. Yet Barber cannot show (or even reasonably assert) that a cohesive moral community united in ranking of civic and political goods over private goods can be constructed in the face of deep cultural and ethical diversity – regardless of the mechanisms for political participation that strong democracy offers up.

Another possible response to these dilemmas which Barber fails to embrace is suggested by the recent work of David Miller. Miller proposes a weaker republicanism than that of Barber, one that relies upon fewer (and more explicit) normative presuppositions. Miller admits that 'republican tradition has held up the active and virtuous citizen as a model, valuing the life of public participation above the various forms of private life that citizens might engage in'; but he urges us

> . . . to distinguish what (some) classical republicans have said from what the republican view of citizenship actually requires. What it requires is something weaker: that it should be part of each person's good to be engaged at some level in political debate, so that the laws and policies of the state do not appear to him or her simply as alien impositions but as the outcome of a reasonable agreement to which he or she has been party.[45]

Nothing in Miller's account of citizenship conflicts with the requirements of a pluralistic conception of democracy, one that is sensitive to the different pulls of citizens' particularistic attachments, identities and beliefs. True, as Miller concedes, his conception cannot accommodate groups that believe that 'religious trafficking with the secular world compromises their faith', but possibly no notion of citizenship within the scope of democratic theory could do so.

Miller's discussion of republicanism brings into relief the normative presuppositions of even weakly republican accounts of citizenship and politics, but we discover that these are much less contentious than those implicit in Barber's theory. Some level of participation by all citizens is essential, on Miller's view, in order that no person or group feel alienated from the political culture, and so that we may ensure that no voices are excluded a priori. This requires not only changes to certain political

institutions in democratic states, but also some minimal preparation of citizens for civic duties (to ensure that they have the necessary capacities for choice and participation in public debate). In response to the complex needs and beliefs of a diverse population, Miller's account of politics recognizes that there are vastly different levels of interest and willingness to engage actively in political life; it 'hold[s] the more modest position that although politics is indeed a necessary part of the good life, different people can be expected to give it a different weight according to their own personal values'.[46] It follows from this recognition that in order better to include culturally diverse citizens, we may need to expand and multiply the access points to democratic politics in liberal states.

Agonism, diversity and postmodern theories of difference

Where republican theories of pluralistic and agonistic democracy remain committed – if somewhat critically so – to the goal of agreement in politics, postmodern theories of agonism seem to view conflict and disagreement as an end in themselves. This is especially the case with those writers who embrace a Nietzschean rather than a classical (and/or republican) view of agonism, and those who follow a particular reading of Arendt that stresses the *expressive* rather than the *communicative* character of her concepts of action, plurality and politics. Although I am not keen to assess the Nietzschean account of agonistic politics here – nor do I find the postmodern appropriations of Arendt especially convincing – it is useful nonetheless to review briefly the relationship between agonism and pluralism as construed by some postmodern political theorists.

The idea that an agonistic model of democracy gestures towards a more inclusive, pluralistic politics has recently been put forth by William Connolly, whose account of agonism 'insists that one significant way to support human dignity is to cultivate agonistic respect between interlocking and contending constituencies'.[47] This, however, tells us little about whether and how democracies can institutionalize practices of inclusion and mutual respect; Connolly continues:

> A democracy infused with a spirit of agonism is one in which divergent orientations to the mysteries of existence find overt expression in public life. Spaces for difference to be are established through the play of political contestation. . . . The terms of contestation enlarge opportunities for participants to engage the relational and contingent character of the identities that constitute them, and this effect in turn establishes one of the preconditions for respectful strife between parties who reciprocally acknowledge the contestable character of the faiths that orient them and give them definition in relation to one another.[48]

In part, Connolly's point is simply a postmodern reformulation of the republican view that a more participatory conception of citizenship, one stressing increased citizen responsibility and greater points of access to politics, could at least *potentially* include a greater range of members of (hitherto marginalized) communities. However, the *stronger* claim that an agonistic model of democracy could foster greater inclusion of diverse citizens as well as mutual respect between communities will remain an ineffectual bit of rhetoric in the absence of clearer ideas about how (or indeed whether) we can formalize such inclusion and recognition. The vision of 'an intercultural engagement of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness between contending identities linked together by multiple bonds of interest, interdependence and memory' says nothing about what agonistic institutions could help to inculcate and sustain such respect.[49] Moreover, Connolly's optimistic view sidesteps the ways in which social relations of power may undercut the abilities and opportunities of agents to participate in democratic (and agonistic) institutions. Who has meaningful access to different political institutions; who possesses the leisure time, education and skills to form judgments and participate in public debate; and whether the mass media compromise citizens' independence in matters of opinion and decision-making: these are all questions that need to be addressed if an agonistic conception of democracy is to be credible.

A further aspect of postmodernists' claims about the affinity between agonism and pluralism is the contention that agonism will help to instantiate a *non-essentialist* understanding of social and cultural identities. Connolly suggests that

> When democratic politics is robust, when it operates to disturb the naturalization of settled conventions, when it exposes settled identities to some of the contestable contingencies that constitute them, then one is in a more favorable position to reconsider some of the demands built into those conventions and identities.[50]

On this view, agonistic democracy gives fuller expression to differences in public life and helps to expose the 'relational character of identity\difference'; in contrast to the static view of collective identities that marks the notion of differentiated citizenship, agonistic democracy 'disturbs the closure of self-identity and, sometimes, provides a medium for modifying the terms of collective identity. This combination increases the chance . . . that a larger variety of identities will be allowed to contend with one another on democratic terms.'[51] Echoing this position, Bonnie Honig believes that agonistic institutions upset fixed identities and relations of power:

> [T]he project of aesthetic preparation is itself political (not prepolitical) because its practices of self-fashioning challenge existing distributions of

power, disrupt the hegemonic social, and proliferate political spaces when they interrupt the routine, predictability, and repetition on which (on Arendt's own account) dominant patterns of private realm identity depend.[52]

The idea that agonistic democracy might diminish the significance of existing, pre-political loyalties and attachments, and simultaneously accommodate and encourage more complex, contingent, overlapping (and so less entrenched) forms of identity is a sizeable claim, one that Honig and Connolly do little to support. It is not immediately clear how public conflict and contestation help to destabilize or even challenge the fixity of group identities at the same time as including a broader spectrum of citizens. Indeed, it seems equally as likely that a model of politics that emphasizes conflict and disagreement could lead to the entrenchment of social and cultural group identities. Quite possibly political institutions with an oppositional or 'agonistic' character might make it more difficult for diverse cultural communities to see that they do share at least some social and moral views, norms and interests in common with others – even leading instead to the reification and polarization of their identities.

Where do postmodern agonistic democrats go wrong in their claims about the inclusiveness of agonistic models of political life? I suggest that at least part of the answer lies with their appropriation of Arendt's thought. Both Connolly and Honig rely heavily upon Arendt's conceptions of action, identity and plurality, which they ultimately graft on to their discussions of politics in socially plural democratic states. But they wrongly take Arendt's conceptions of identity and plurality as a statement about the contingency and complexity of identity and an endorsement of the *political* value of human diversity. As argued earlier, Arendtian plurality, *pace* postmodern appropriations of her thought, is essentially an appreciation of the 'distinctiveness' or uniqueness of individual persons as revealed by human agency; not only is this *not* a pluralistic endorsement of the importance of cultural and social diversity, and of different identities, to politics, but also it stands opposed to this view. Honig in particular has underplayed Arendt's mistrust of identifications based on race, culture, ethnicity and nation, and her refusal to see these as possible legitimate bases of political action. Indeed, Honig has tried to argue that Arendt's thinking (especially her conception of plurality) affirms the importance of both the private and public dimensions of identity.[53] Yet her argument hinges on a doubtful re-interpretation of Arendt's concept of action, in which action is conceived as irrepressible and non-agent-centered, a performative 'event' and a 'site of resistance' that resists its public boundaries and 'spills over' into public and social spaces. Honig's discussion of Arendt displaces the subject in ways that distort her notion of action; it is only by minimizing the agency of the *subject* in Arendt's

work that Honig is able to make the claim that action cannot be 'suppressed' or confined to the public realm, such that private identities and practices are brought into the public arena against Arendt's own designs.

Conclusion

If an agonistic account of democracy were amended to meet the criticism that it cannot readily accommodate citizens' cultural, religious and moral differences and identities in political life, I suggest it would lose much of the distinctiveness that supporters claim for this political approach. Indeed, I believe it would resemble recent liberal perspectives more than agonistic democrats would like to admit. Liberals like Rawls, Larmore and Brian Barry acknowledge the fact of deep pluralism and disagreement in liberal democratic states and go some distance in developing proposals for political institutions that can respect citizens' differences. Perhaps the only remaining crucial difference between a critically amended agonistic conception of democracy and neutral or political liberalism is that the latter locates citizens' disagreements in their conflicting conceptions of the good, which are simply to be bracketed from politics. Not all liberals share this view, however; writers like Stephen Lukes have recently moved towards the recognition that disagreement on moral, cultural and social issues is the basic condition of politics, and that we need to develop legal and political institutions that appreciate this.[54]

Liberals who adopt an agonistic perspective on politics – or who acknowledge the centrality of moral conflict and other forms of disagreement in politics – recognize that deep value pluralism prevents us from appealing to an authoritative standard to resolve conflicts of value. Unlike postmodern agonistic democrats, these liberals do not therefore dismiss the possibility of conflict resolution; there are, as John Kekes suggests, 'reasonable ways of resolving conflicts among incommensurable values' other than by appealing to idealized principles of rationality and norms of consensus.[55] The recognition that citizens' moral disagreements are an inextricable feature of politics in liberal democratic states begs the question of what sorts of institutions and mechanisms might be needed to help mediate conflict and encourage agreement. Unfortunately, proponents of agonistic democracy typically fail to acknowledge the key role played by *institutions* in *making* citizens *agree*, or in finding solutions to common problems.

I have argued that for any conception of agonistic democracy to be credible, it must grapple with difficult questions of moral and cultural pluralism. One possible strategy for the resolution of deep value conflicts – especially those to do with religious and cultural differences –

that has potentially wide applicability for democratic political institutions of many types is that of *mediation*. Unlike neutral liberal approaches, such as Larmore's *modus vivendi* and Rawls' notion of overlapping consensus, mediation need not entail elusive searches for common norms of rationality or agreement on basic principles of justice. Instead, mediation is a response to breakdowns within existing discursive processes and institutions – an attempt to make conflicting parties address the question of how to proceed in the face of these differences. It is a form of conflict resolution, but one that allows opposing parties to admit that the dispute facing them is very possibly intractable without the participation of a third party able to extract concessions and compromise. In culturally plural states, citizens need institutions to facilitate and secure agreements – either by reformulating their position in response to one another's positions, or by agreeing to strategic compromises.

While deliberative strategies proposed by proponents of deliberative democracy and communicative ethics aim at a substantive consensus, mediation from the perspective of a prudence-based politics seeks only limited solutions and compromises. Nor does it presuppose much about agents' rationality: mediation techniques and goals are adapted to the actual level of cooperation possible on the part of the parties involved, as well as what is feasible given the practical social and political environment. Mediation need not assume actors will agree to particular courses of action that would be, by many political theorists' standards of rationality, objectively 'reasonable'. Whether the disagreements are short-lived or seemingly intractable, mediation is well suited to situations where the prospects for both informal and 'thick' normative agreements are dim, and communication and negotiation between communities have broken down. Deeply seated multicultural disputes in particular could benefit from mediation, since it compels parties to listen to one another's views in full when they are at their most 'deaf' and least likely to volunteer to listen. Mediation also requires agents to examine and clarify the precise source of their disagreements in light of opposing views, as John Dryzek has recently argued:

> Mediation in practice can sometimes involve little more than a veneer of participation in decisions masking the co-optation of the relatively powerless by the securely powerful. . . . However, mediation can also stimulate discourse and reflection about goals, interests, and values and reciprocal education over the issues at hand. . . . Participation in mediation puts the individual in the company of others who do not share his or her normative principles, which can stimulate reflection on these values.[56]

It is important to remember that mediation does *not* require that parties understand the issues at hand *in the same way* as each other,

much less agree on ends and values. This is what separates off agonistic democracy's version of deliberation – in which mediation could potentially play a valuable role – from models of deliberative democracy, whose explicit goal is typically strong, rational consensus. It is also what distinguishes agonistic from (more fully) republican and communitarian ideals of political life, which similarly seek to arrive at the unanimous endorsement of political ideals (and frequently presuppose the prior existence of shared norms). Mediation-based models of democracy might require none of these supports. The presence of a mediator or third party merely facilitates 'equal' deliberation, prevents dialogue from deteriorating into uninformed attacks, and guides discussion towards possible resolutions and compromises.

As this discussion of the potential importance of mediation to democratic politics suggests, any practicable conception of agonistic democracy (and about this possibility I remain skeptical) must also recognize the role of *positive law* in fostering respect for disagreement and clearing the way for the possible resolution of conflicts. Indeed, the formal respect that parties must grant each other in deliberation is possible only against a background of political and legal structures whose goal it is to secure this respect. It is because of the inevitability of disagreement that we need to systematize rights and to think about how our legal and political institutions can help us to exercise judgment in the face of diversity and conflict. This view may sound suspiciously like political liberalism. Upon closer inspection, however, an 'agonistic *liberal*' approach has more in common with liberal toleration than it does with contemporary notions of liberal neutrality. It is a pragmatic view that starts from agonistic premises, signaling a sharp turn away from dominant liberal and communitarian approaches to pluralism, and towards a deeper form of democratic politics embedded in legal and political institutions.[57]

The problem, of course, is that the content and application of law are by no means neutral or uncontested; in addition to helping secure basic respect and protection for diverse citizens and groups, positive law can itself be the target of much dispute, particularly in deeply pluralistic states. This is no small matter. Indeed, those who entrust positive law with the task of establishing respect for citizens' disagreement will have to face up to the challenge of how to make it responsive to the very social and ethical diversity that it purports to protect.

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Notes

1 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xvi.
2 ibid., p. 157.
3 In *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), William Connolly criticizes the liberal ideal of a neutral state, especially in connection with his discussion of religious fundamentalism: 'The doubtful claim to liberal neutrality, combined with a tendency in some quarters of liberalism to dismiss out of hand perspectives that contest presumptions in the liberal matrix, pours fuel on those fundamentalist fires of revenge liberals campaign against' (p. xxviii).
4 This claim is reflected, for instance, in Connolly's account of democracy as a perspective that 'cultivates a politics of agonistic respect among multiple constituencies who respond differentially to mysteries of being while acknowledging each other to be worthy of respect': ibid., p. 154.
5 David Miller, 'Citizenship and Pluralism', *Political Studies* 43(3) (1995), p. 443.
6 ibid., pp. 447–8.
7 Quentin Skinner, 'Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections', in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 43–4.
8 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 1993) and Mouffe, 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity', *Inquiry* 31(1–2) (1995): 102.
9 Similarly, David Miller points out that his pluralistic republican perspective 'has resources to deal with the question of pluralism' but cannot 'cope with radical disagreement about the very existence of the state of the kind which gives rise to separatist movements. Faced with such disagreement, it is very unlikely that the conflicting groups will be sufficiently motivated to search for political agreement on the basis of reasons that all can accept. For this reason . . . a common sense of nationality is an essential background to politics of this kind.' Miller, 'Citizenship and Pluralism', pp. 450–1.
10 William Connolly, for instance, suggests that ' "agonistic democracy," a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity/difference'. *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. x.
11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 205.
12 Hannah Arendt, 'The Concept of History', in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 63.

13 For Arendt, specifically *political* action cannot be attributed to persons behaving as private individuals: 'Real political action comes out as a group action. And you join that group or you don't. And whatever you do on your own you are really not an actor – you are an anarchist.' See her conference comments, 'On Hannah Arendt', in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World,* ed. M. A. Hill (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), p. 310.

14 *The Human Condition*, pp. 190, 181 and 204.

15 ibid., pp. 180–1.

16 ibid., p. 180.

17 ibid., p. 192.

18 'What is Freedom?', in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 152–3.

19 *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

20 ibid., p. 200.

21 One of the reasons why the agonistic dimension of Arendt's account of action is often ignored in favor of 'communicative' and 'dialogical' interpretations is that her discussion of action in *The Human Condition* stresses action as 'human togetherness' rather than agonism. Yet as Margaret Canovan has shown, Arendt, in her unpublished manuscript lectures, looked to Homeric heroism rather than the orderly Greek polis to describe action. In these lectures, Arendt invokes the 'warlike deeds of the Homeric Kings', based on conflict and the search for fame, in conjuring action; she emphatically does not choose, and indeed contrasts such action with, the relative stability of the Greek polis, in which speech, and not action per se, was paramount. See Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 136–7.

22 *The Human Condition*, p. 190.

23 ibid., p. 7.

24 Aristotle's use of the analogy of the household, made functional and self-sufficient by the work of members with diverse roles, suggests that his understanding of plurality has little if anything in common with contemporary understandings of pluralism. It is important to Aristotle's theory that people's differences be conducive to community-building, and not destructive of unity; he believed that social harmony requires a certain ethical, and likely cultural, homogeneity. Aristotle, *The Politics* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 1261 b6; see also 1261 a10.

25 See, for instance, Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the role of identity and difference in Aristotelian ethics in her book, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), especially pp. 363–99.

26 *The Human Condition*, p. 175.

27 In his most recent writing, William Connolly acknowledges and affirms aspects of Arendt's hostility towards 'the nation' as a basis for politics. See his 'A Critique of Pure Politics', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23(5) (1997), p. 15.

28 John Kekes draws this useful distinction in his discussion of pluralism in *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. p. 10. Kekes' emphasis, however, is on the narrower category of *moral* pluralism, or the belief that 'good lives require the realization of

radically different types of values, both moral and non-moral, and that many of these are conflicting and cannot be realized together' (ibid., 11). My discussion of pluralism focuses on social and cultural diversity in the first instance.

29 Here Arendt's debt to Kant is unmistakable: she appropriates his notions of standpoint and 'enlarged mentality' as mechanisms that might illuminate meaning and foster understanding. Arendt writes that 'the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives.' Arendt takes the unusual (and controversial) step of appropriating Kant's notion of the judgment of taste in order to construct a conception of political judgment. She does so because she believes the judgment of taste involves intersubjectivity and reflection, as well as the presence of fellow judges, a *sensus communis*, both of which Arendt considers central to political life. In her view, 'judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account. . . . I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world.' See Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 42–3 and pp. 57 and 67.

30 See the discussion by James Bernauer, 'On Reading and Mis-Reading Hannah Arendt', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11(1) (1985): 16–17.

31 Arendt means by equality a certain set of political rights, such as the right of citizenship and the opportunity to participate actively in political life.

32 'The dark background of mere givenness, the background formed by our unchangeable and unique nature, breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity – which are identical with the limitations of human equality.' See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 301.

33 'The great danger arising from the existence of people forced to live outside the common world is that they are thrown back, in the midst of civilization, on their natural givenness, on their mere differentiation. They lack that tremendous equalizing of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth and yet, since they are no longer allowed to partake in the human artifice, they begin to belong to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species.' ibid., p. 302.

34 Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 122.

35 ibid., p. 119.

36 ibid., p. 130.
37 ibid., pp. 129–30.
38 'The Social Question', in H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 110.
39 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, pp. 118 and 261.
40 ibid., p. 145.
41 ibid., p. 151.
42 ibid., p. 135.
43 ibid., p. 229.
44 ibid., p. 155.
45 Miller, 'Citizenship and Pluralism', p. 448.
46 ibid.
47 Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. x.
48 ibid., p. 211.
49 Connolly, 'A Critique of Pure Politics', p. 21.
50 Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 192.
51 ibid., pp. 193 and 200.
52 Bonnie Honig, 'The Politics of Agonism', *Political Theory* 21(3) (1993): 532.
53 See Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 121; Honig, 'Arendt, Identity, and Difference', *Political Theory* 16(1) (1988): 77–98, and Honig, 'The Politics of Agonism', pp. 528–33. For similar interpretations of Arendt, see also Dana Villa, 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action', *Political Theory* 20(3) (1992): 274–308, and Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space', *History of the Human Sciences* 6(2) (1993): 97–114.
54 Steven Lukes, *Moral Conflict and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).
55 John Kekes, 'Pluralism and the Value of Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11(1) (1994): 44.
56 John Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 46.
57 Some liberals contest the view that contemporary, Rawlsian-style liberalism leaves insufficient space for disagreement – but not, in my view, very effectively. Recent examples include Alain Boyer, 'Democracy and Disagreement', *Ratio Juris* 8(1) (1995): 1–8, who thinks Rawls' earlier formulation of justice leaves ample room for 'dissensus', and Brian Barry, who defends political liberalism against criticisms from agonistic democrats in his article 'In Defense of Political Liberalism', *Ratio Juris* 7(3) (1994): 325–30.