

RETHINKING DEMOCRATIC SUBJECTIVITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

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As social media platforms and the internet have become an integral part of our civic and political lives, many questions about how to approach digital politics and civic engagement have emerged in the past few years. This project attempts to address some of those questions, specifically how we may think about civic education in the digital age. I begin with the premise that in the digital age, education for democracy must focus on its epistemic aspect. While proponents of aggregative forms of democracy consider vote to be the main form of citizen participation, forms of epistemic democracy such as deliberative democracy seek to contribute to social knowledge through communication amongst citizens, civil society, market players and state institutions. I initially ground my inquiry within the American context by highlighting the participatory character of the American democratic ethos. For this, I evoke John Dewey's view of democracy as involving collective inquiry that allows both individual growth and the enrichment of collective life. Then, by examining Jürgen Habermas' deliberative and Chantal Mouffe's agonistic models of democracy against the backdrop of increasing digital mediation of civic and political discourse, I problematize democratic subjectivity in the digital age and

suggest using Etienne Balibar's notion of transindividuality, which he develops from 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. While Habermas demonstrates that certain communication conditions are necessary for legitimate political action, Mouffe reminds us that taking into account the importance of collective affective drives can help us take seriously the plurality of our contemporary democracies. However, I argue that in the digital age the strengths of these two approaches must be adapted to the evolving materiality of the environment in which people's lived experience takes place rather than merely kept for instances of communication that occur within state institutions. For this, Balibar's suggestion to think of the process of freedom of speech as a public good allows us to ground discourse in the material context in which it is produced and maintained, and provides a generative way of thinking of the role of education in our times.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter I – INTRODUCTION	1
Significance.....	5
Key Terms.....	8
Overview of the Dissertation	19
Chapter II – COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRACY	22
Defining Democracy.....	23
Democracy as Practice.....	24
An Intersubjective Epistemology.....	26
Might Democracy have an Epistemic Function in the Digital Age?	27
Participation in the Digital Age	28
The Power of Media Institutions.....	31
Re-defining Democratic Subjectivity in the Digital Age.....	36
Conclusion	40
Chapter III – DELIBERATION, AGONISM AND DEMOCRACY.....	42
Deliberative and Agonistic Politics	43
Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action.....	43
Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Politics.....	54
Deliberation and A(nta)gonism in the Contemporary Media Landscape	61
The Internet as a Space of Deliberation	62
The Internet as a Space of a “Vibrant Clash of Agonistic Positions”	63
Conclusion	72

Chapter IV – TOWARDS FREEDOM OF SPEECH AS PUBLIC GOOD.....	73
Looking Beyond an Abstracted and Punctual Moment of Encounter	75
Spinoza’s Ontology: We Cannot Escape the Myriad Relations That Are Constantly Affecting Us	79
A Short Introduction to Spinoza’s Metaphysics	79
Individuality as Transindividuality	80
Political Implications of Transindividuality	82
The Digital: De-structuring and Re-structuring of Compositions	86
The Responsive Process of Freedom of Speech as Public Good.....	90
Conclusion	103
Chapter V – EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE.....	105
Education Today: Beyond Individualism	108
Communication: I Hear You Saying.....	111
Your Freedom, My Freedom, Our Freedom.....	112
Education as Communication	114
Education in the Digital Age.....	119
Conclusion	128
REFERENCES	133
Appendix – Citation Guide for Spinoza’s <i>Ethics</i>	144

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms and the internet have become the sites of a battleground of ideas and political discussion. As digital technologies become more enmeshed in our lives, many questions have emerged about how to navigate the constant shifts in social and political conditions that these technologies help bring about. Around 2011, the link between democracy and social media enabled connectivity seemed like a given. Across the Arab world activists were organizing massive pro-democracy protests with the aid of social media. In the United States, similar means were used to coordinate protests against excessive corporate influence in politics giving shape to Occupy Wall Street movement. Things have significantly changed since then. The resurgence of authoritarianism that followed these “Twitter revolutions” and “Facebook revolutions” made it clear that digitally-centered activism is perhaps a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for lasting political change. Today, in 2019, in an environment of even more communication and exchange, democracies around the world are menaced by the lure of ethno-nationalist populism. Strongmen offering an illusion of a return to law and order are being elected in democratic countries around the globe. Communication technologies

present to us, in a new light, the aporetic character of the power of the mass which is simultaneously feared but also believed to contain the best form of intelligence.

We tend to think that the more means of communication people have at their disposal, the more democratic a country will be. We view freedom of speech as the ultimate expression of our individuality and liberty and associate this expression to the democratic ideal. With social media and portable devices accessible to practically everybody we had never had so many ways of expressing ourselves and connecting with each other. Yet, somehow, all of this “freedom” is increasingly resulting in extreme polarization.

It seems that, in contemporary democracies around the world, there is a mismatch between the knowledges, values and collective desires that are being produced and circulated in the social realm and the actions, values and goals of traditional parties. It is on situations like this that this dissertation seeks to shed light by reflecting on how we may think of civic education in the digital age. The essential problem this dissertation addresses is:

- In view of the increasing technological mediation of our daily and political lives, how can education help us know ourselves and make decisions as individual persons and collectives in a way that takes into account our embodied character in the world and in our communities?

I focus on the question of “knowing” as I consider that democracy is essentially an epistemic endeavor. The legitimacy of collective action is inherently related to a kind of social knowledge. In this sense, I am influenced by John Dewey’s pragmatism. For him, knowledge emerges from active adaptation to one’s environment. This adaptation

doesn't only happen at the individual level but it is also something collective as Dewey understands society as a kind of "social organism." Political knowledge is the result of individuals and collectives being adaptive to changing social conditions. Democracy is essential both for the flourishing of the individual and for the welfare of the community. Unlike the view of democracy in which individuals compete and negotiate for the advancement of their private interests, or a purely formal view of democratic institutions, Dewey viewed democracy as a mode of social inquiry and collective problem solving. For this, making claims about a common problem public and discussing them is essential to democracy. In his words:

The method of democracy – insofar as it is that of organized intelligence – is to bring out ...conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately. (Dewey, 1993, p. 148)

Dewey's approach to democracy presupposes ideas of rationality as well as solidarity within the collective which become complicated in contemporary large-scale democracies and in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world. However, despite these complications, I believe that giving priority to the epistemic aspect of democracy is crucial in our times. I would go as far as to say that it is *inescapable* if we want to ensure the viability of our democracies and our survival on this planet. With the dominant capitalist logic and the entanglement of corporate interests in politics, more often than not, it is the interests and subjectivities of a select few that shape political action. This is not sustainable at a time of increasing inequalities as well as imminent climate and ecological collapse. Since these challenges are not limited by national borders, we need to think of the epistemic aspect of democracy at different scales and not just at that of the national scale. Given that democratic institutions exist at the level of the

nation-state and not at a transnational level, different kinds of organized transnational solidarities such as party, minority, interest and union solidarities are necessary.

However, building and organizing these solidarities requires purposeful efforts. How do these collective efforts come to be?

The question of “knowing” is imbricated with “who” knows, therefore the question of democratic subjectivity is explored throughout the dissertation. I hold that the digital age recasts key questions about the composition of social knowledge and thus challenges traditional notions of democratic subjectivity. This dissertation evaluates democratic subjectivity against the backdrop of the digital age starting with the subject conceived as a pre-social being that is the source of reason and knowledge, then evaluating different forms of intersubjectivity, and finally settling on a transindividual notion of democratic subjectivity.

This dissertation is inscribed in a long-term quest for understanding what it means to live in a democracy in our times. On the one hand, it is a personal project as someone grappling with both having grown up in Colombia – a country that has been in armed conflict all her life despite being institutionally organized as a democracy – and being a citizen of the United States – for many the model of modern democracy which is also the most powerful country in the world. On the other hand, it is an effort to contribute to discussions about civic education from the perspective of someone for whom the urgency of addressing common problems in an increasingly interdependent world is of palpable importance.

This project aspires to help both researchers and teachers rethink what it means to be part of a democracy in our times. Through an exploration of democratic subjectivity in

the digital age, it hopes to open up ways of thinking about contemporary citizenship in a constantly changing communication landscape. While it does not delve deeply into contemporary classroom practices, it does aspire to contribute to scholarly discussions related to democratic citizenship at a time of instant opinions, words hollowed of meaning and information overload but also of energized democratic instincts, assemblages of organized resistance and liberated social knowledges. In the end, this dissertation does not prescribe fixed solutions to ways of approaching “truth” and knowledge in the digital age but – by suggesting a re-grounding of democratic sociality in responsive communication – it inscribes knowledge production and collective action within a philanthropic ethics.

Significance

Thinking about civic education in contemporary pluralist societies and in an increasingly interdependent world is a challenge that several authors grapple with. At the heart of these challenges is the preoccupation about how to fully account for the complexity of embodied lived experience. Theoretical approaches informed by postmodern (Vanessa Andreotti), critical (Michael Apple) and classical (Martha Nussbaum) thought have been proposed to counter the general trends in education that promote a homogenizing global discourse that prioritizes preparing youth to become competitive in a globalized marketplace. Andreotti’s postmodern approach is founded on the idea that all discourses are ideological and that attempting to come up with one “grand narrative” – as described by Lyotard – necessarily implies some form of hegemony (Andreotti, 2010). She suggests a vision of citizenship that views the world as

an organic system instead of an “engineered one” in which meanings are negotiated and learning happens in contextualized and embodied manners. Apple’s critical approach grounds student’s awareness of diversity in their local experiences – given the increasing plurality of countries like the United States – and invites them to reflect on power dynamics in their daily lives by asking questions such as: whose knowledge is being favored as legitimate? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge? (Apple, 2011). Nussbaum’s capabilities approach attempts to address questions of diversity of values by asking, for a given group, the Aristotelian question: “What activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of a life that is truly human?” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 385).

While these approaches engage thoughtfully with questions of plurality, lived experience and hegemonic discourses, they remain mostly in the theoretical realm and fail to fully account for the growing influence of technologically mediated communication in our lives and how this mediation affects our perceptions of knowledge and identity.

In the fields of communication and anthropology and education, scholarly conversations about technologically mediated communication have largely focused on the communicative practices of youth that often involve the use of digital technologies. In line with proponents of New Literacy Studies (see Street, 2003), literacy is seen as culturally and socially situated practices for communicating purposefully instead of an abstract set of skills linked to written expression (Street & Street, 1984). In the past two decades, a substantive amount of ethnographically-based sociocultural research has documented and given nuanced accounts of the diversity of online and offline literacy

practices, their social and cultural positioning and significance, and suggested implications for educational endeavors and institutions. Relevant to this study is the increased access youth have to communities of practice through networked technologies, and the insights that empirical research on new literacy practices have shed on these practices. One important finding is how youths' perceptions of authoritative knowledge are changing in the era of networked communication. In this dynamic, experienced peers rather than traditional authority figures such as teachers and parents are seen as more legitimate norm-setters and an epistemology of shared knowledge and expertise challenges that of institutional authority (Ito et al., 2009).

Furthermore, conversations around empirically-based research that focuses on the practices of youth point to the widespread use of interactive media for civic engagement and the development of a sense of social and political agency among youth. While there is abundant literature documenting instances of youth civic engagement such as through community-based activism, hip-hop literacies, and various forms of advocacy (see for example Earl & Kimport, 2009; Lam, 2009; Morrell, 2015), mainstream depictions tend to perpetuate a narrative of youth apathy towards civic life (Lesko, 2012). Researchers like Henry Jenkins and colleagues have developed conceptual frameworks to think about civic education for our digital age that is informed by the social and cultural practices of youth – both online and offline – and advance important concepts about civic participation such as *fan activism* and the *civic imagination*.

For this dissertation, I argue that civic education literature would benefit from locating existing technologically-mediated practices within a normative framework. This dissertation hopes to contribute to thought about civic education by examining how

political theory might fit with contemporary technologically mediated participatory practices.

Key Terms

Before proceeding I clarify below my position with regards to certain key terms of this project. While the meaning of most of these terms evolve throughout the dissertation, I deem it helpful for the reader to know my initial stance with regards to these terms.

On the question of “knowing”: When I ask how we can “know” ourselves as individuals and collectives, the kind of “knowing” I am interested in is more phenomenological and communicative than instrumental. I am not concerned with how, for example, a health tracker watch might “know” better than I do how many hours of sleep I got last night, but in how I might respond when somebody asks: “how did you sleep last night?”

The following vignette about one of my experiences as an interpreter in France might clarify what I mean by “knowing”:

When I worked as an interpreter at the Administrative Court in Paris I once had to interpret for an asylum seeker of my own nationality. Although we quickly realized that we were both Colombians, I did not have very much time to speak to him before the hearing, so I did not have the chance to explain that I was just an interpreter and that my role was only to “repeat” in French what he had said in Spanish. In front of the judge, Ernesto,¹ the asylum seeker, started telling the details of when he was kidnapped in his

¹ Pseudonym.

village and how after being freed – despite moving to Bogotá – he and his family received more threats. At that point he turned to me and said “you know what it’s like.” Flustered, because I knew he was talking to me instead of to the judge, I quickly nodded and told him that he had to pretend that I wasn’t there, that I was just there to put his words into French. Later that day I wondered what he meant by “you know what it’s like.”

As a fellow Colombian, I certainly felt I “knew” a lot more about “what it was like” in Colombia at the time than a French person, but I certainly had not experienced anything similar to Ernesto. While he came from the countryside and had been displaced to a poor neighborhood in cold Bogotá (the capital in the highlands), I was the daughter of educators in warm-weather Cali. He was in France seeking asylum. I was a there as a student. As for many Colombians and Caleños² violence had touched my family in different ways including the kidnapping of one of my uncles, living in fear of our narco neighbors; I had also grown up seeing the news on television that depicted the confrontations between the guerrilla, the military and paramilitary; and I had heard the stories of my public university classmates who had served in the army. But I had lived in relative comfort in the city. I wondered if my imagination had enough elements to reconstruct anything similar to this man’s experience.

In the administrative court of my example above, a judge had to make a decision based on the story of a person whose experience had taken place in a faraway setting. Here, I do not wish to question that judicial process in particular. I knew background research was done in each case, and that there were options for appeal. I value the forensic ideal in institutional justice. What I would like to focus on is more at the level of

² People from Cali. Cali was particularly affected by cartel violence when I lived there in the 1980s and 90s.

social knowledge, how people from underrepresented contexts and underrepresented minorities are in a situation of epistemic fragility vis-à-vis institutions and social systems. By epistemic fragility, I refer to the difficulty underrepresented people might encounter when attempting to express their experiences. For this, Miranda Fricker's concept of "epistemic injustice" provides a useful framework for thinking about these questions of credibility and power (Fricker, 2007). In her book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, she argues that there is a kind of injustice in which a person's capacity as a knower is undermined either because the person's word is deemed less credible simply due to factors such as their race, gender or social status (Fricker calls this "testimonial injustice"), or because an oppressed group is unable to articulate their experiences to others or even make sense of their own experience because – having remained outside of the public realm– they have not had the opportunity to develop a conceptual language for it ("hermeneutical injustice" for Fricker).

While in the dissertation I do not use justice in my theoretical framework, Fricker's concepts are helpful to convey what I mean by "knowing" particularly in its social acceptance and how it is inscribed in communication. The example above – because it involves at least two different countries – also highlights the urgency of thinking through how we "know" ourselves at an age when we are increasingly globally interdependent. If we think that the violence that Ernesto was fleeing had exponentially intensified in Colombia in large part because of the money and greed that comes with the drug trade – which is a trade to supply consumers in countries like France (and, of course, the US) – then we might start to realize that his presence in that court was perhaps a symptom of a problem that is common to all and that whoever is tasked with addressing it

needs to take into account the experience of all of those involved. Of course, one may not speak of causality in problems of such complexity, but the persistence of such violence makes one wonder.

In the digital age, as there is at least the infrastructure for words, images and stories to travel around the globe, there is, at least, the potential for some kind of collective understanding and action about these issues.

Digital age: Is the “digital world” distinct from the “material world”? Do we have different lives in the digital realm from that of the “real world”? Do we live in a “digital age” or as many are now suggesting a “post-digital” one? Trying to pin down a definition of the digital as it affects us socially, politically and economically is a challenge, especially as its plasticity results in ever-changing manifestations that, in turn, have radically different implications for human life: if thirty years ago personal web pages and online forums opened an age of techno-utopianism, today, the interference of malicious actors seeking to influence democratic elections through social media has left many wondering about the impact of these mediations in our lives. However, the more we see how digital technologies affect us, the more it becomes pressing to try to understand them and our how they are involved in our lives. It is precisely for this reason that I chose to locate the question of this dissertation in the “digital age.” I use the term “digital age” to refer to the period of time that started after the introduction of digital technologies into mainstream social life. While “the digital” simply refers to encoding information in bits (binary symbols) that can be transmitted in a networked manner, its social and political impacts are undeniably significant but also hotly debated. Negroponte (1995) was one of the first theorists to suggest that “being digital” implied widespread, pervasive and

unique shifts for society, politics and the economy. He articulated the difference between the “atoms” of the analog world and “bits” of the digital. While analog information is “attached” to its physical support (e.g. words on a book), digital information becomes “free” from a given material support. Bits, differently from atoms allow contents to be persistent (online expressions are recorded and archived), replicable (content made out of bits can be easily duplicated), scalable (the potential visibility of content is great) and searchable (contents can be accessed through search) (boyd, 2010, p. 7).

These characteristics of bits shape the architecture of the environment through which our mediated lives unfold. Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2012) urge us to view these changes within the continuity of human life – which, in the end, continues to happen through our embodied beings – rather than thinking of them as radical transformations of who we are. They identify four elements that characterize our contemporary media environment:

- *Interactive*: more so than mass media, digital media is interactive. Audiences can respond back to journalists and producers, users can search through and query databases, publics can speak up to hold institutions and corporations accountable. While in principle anyone has a “voice” online, in practice only a few have the resources or power to be heard. Interaction happens mostly among peer groups.
- *Networked*: Networks are non-centralized, heterarchical, and generally support niche groupings. Contents on networks can “go viral”, affinity groups can easily form across geographies, collective action can take place through networked social media. The “ego-centered” nature of networked media comes with its own new shifts and challenges to how we communicate such as cases of “collapsed

contexts” (personal postings that reach all kinds of different audiences), unprecedented forms of performance of the self, as well as cases of collective confirmation bias.

- *Remix culture*: With the digital, notions of original and copy, producer and consumer are changing. Contents can be reproduced, edited, remixed, copied and shared in ways unanticipated by the original content producers. Collaboration and communities of practice, activism and learning take place through networked media. What happens through networked media might be democratic as new spaces for knowledge construction and contestation are opened but also they can be anti-democratic as the legitimacy of institutions and public trust is menaced, and there may be political or commercial intervention in what counts as knowledge.
- *Ubiquitous*. With the growth of mobile technologies, most of the globe has access to the internet. Even if they don't have access to use it, satellite communications scan, record, collect data and connect all parts of the globe. Therefore, all human life is affected by what David Harvey calls “time-space compression” – as the world becomes ever more intensively and efficiently connected, this has important consequences for the economy, politics (e.g. new ways of being excluded), culture (e.g. extremism) and everyday experience (e.g. blurring of boundaries between work and home, intimacies at a distance).

A note on attempting to theorize with a “moving target”: As much as Lievrouw and Livingstone call us to focus on the continuity of human life rather than on the disruptions caused by the digital, trying to think and write about something that causes so many and

such rapid changes in our political and social lives presupposes many difficulties that I believe are unprecedented for research at other times. As the properties of bits shape and transform the ways in which we communicate, the plasticity they bring to our forms of collective action and perception, introduce new challenges to normative theorization. These difficulties were present throughout the process of writing this dissertation. For instance, I started working on the proposal for this dissertation in early 2016 initially thinking that the Habermasian model of the public sphere and its subsequent theorizations (such as that of Seyla Benhabib) would be an adequate framework to address the question of knowing ourselves in the digital age. My commitment to such models was revised as the year unfolded and unexpected events took place such as the UK referendum vote in favor of Brexit, the vote against the peace process during the Colombian plebiscite, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. As I progressed in my work, and social and political life unfolded, issues that I thought were not sufficiently being addressed in public discourse and that I was including in the text – such as algorithm bias and data harvesting – became a central subject of debate in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The reader of this dissertation will sense some of these shifts throughout the chapters, as they were each written at a different moments in the lapse of two years. The way I tried to address these challenges was by focusing on the conceptualization of the democratic subject, and by using one an example of a digitally-enabled instance of collective subjectivity of the #MeToo movement throughout the dissertation.

Another challenge of working with a broad categorization of a historical “age” such as the “digital age” and its intertwining with social life is the different ways in

which various disciplines and fields of study approach it. Again, the rapidly shifting character of the consequences of the “digital” precipitates these difficulties. If in 2012, Lievrouw and Livingstone remarked that research work pertaining to “the digital” had experienced an acceleration in proliferation and fragmentation into different non-communicating niches since 2001 (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2012), this trend seems to have intensified. Not only is this fragmentation observable within the field of media studies – which is the one Lievrouw and Livingstone document – but also as researchers in other fields and disciplines start to view the ineluctable imbrication of digital communications in our lives, different niches have started to appear within disciplines. For instance, within sociology some might work as “digital sociologists” while others might call their work “cybersociology”, “sociology of the internet” or “sociology of online communities” (Lupton, 2012).

Attempting to articulate the different languages and knowledge from some of this mostly empirical work with more theoretical and normative work was a recurring complication throughout my work on the dissertation. The contemporary theorists that give this dissertation its internal constitution – Habermas, Mouffe and Balibar – do not directly engage with empirical literature about the digital, so I decided to first give accounts of their thought to then show how it could help us understand the realities of contemporary digital communications.

The epistemic aspect of democracy: Min and Wong (2018) define epistemic democracy³ as the type of democracy that privileges the “truth-tracking” ability of democracy as a normative justification for democracy. Of course, this idea of truth in politics is

³ Epistemic democracy has a growing literature. For major statements, see Cohen (1986), List and Goodin (2001), Estlund (1997, 2008) and Landemore (2012). For a helpful overview, see Schwartzberg (2015).

contested: in contemporary societies which are characterized as having plural values, to claim there is one political truth is hardly tenable. However, from a formal point of view, since political decisions have consequential effects on the lives of regular citizens and can create injustices among them, it is essential for democracies to keep their epistemic aspect. Here, we may think of this epistemic aspect not so much as concerned with what truth *is* but with what it *does*.

Democratic subject: The duality inherent to the notion of *subject* captures well the problematics between individual and collective agency that this dissertation seeks to explore. We can be both active *subjects*, that is, agents who engage in thinking, feeling, willing, acting, being, and *participating* and we can also be obedient *subjects* like the subjects of an authority such as a Queen or King. Moreover, we can be *subject* to something else than ourselves, like the law, while we also have *subjectivity*, or our own way of perceiving things. Of course, there are temporalities to all of this: are we merely *subject* to the law when we participated in creating it? When we think of democracy as the government by the people, we are called to be both *agent subjects* – as we ultimately constitute the authority that governs us – as well as *obedient subjects* as we submit to that same authority. But clearly there are mediations to our subjectivity. In modern states, institutions play a role in such mediation. Not only is our agency mediated by institutions (e.g. we elect our representatives), but also, as we will see ahead, institutions play a symbolic role in how we perceive ourselves as individual subjects and collectives. Within a structuralist tradition in which the idea of an objective “truth” is untenable, consciousness is the product of history, culture and society. *Subjectivity* can also be as Louis Althusser suggests, a form of ideological “interpellation.” For Althusser, ideology

is not a static set of beliefs and ideas that dominant classes impose on the dominated but something that is dynamically reconstituted and reproduced through practices, that is, in how we think, act, and understand ourselves in relation to society. As the “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1972/2006, p. 162), ideology “interpellates” people as *subjects* through institutions such as the family, schools, language and the media which he calls “Ideological State Apparatuses.” Through these institutions people both reproduce ideology and are “hailed” by it. These institutions naturalize certain social norms obscuring thus social hierarchies. In Chapters IV and V, I will refer to Althusser’s conception of *subject*.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the context of the digital age, the dynamic of *subjection* and *subjectivity* takes unprecedented forms: Bernard Harcourt suggests that the massive amount of data collecting, recording, mining and assessing that takes place in the digital age reshapes us into marketized *subjects* or *subject-objects*. As the digital realm presents a world full of immediate pleasures, we both reveal ourselves and make ourselves visible to an objectifying surveillance. While we have the impression of agency when expressing ourselves online, we are also willingly surrendering all kinds of details about our lives to corporations and the state.

In order to inform how we may think about civic education at our times, this dissertation explores how we think about *democratic subjectivity* in the digital age. This analysis of democratic subjectivity takes place throughout the entirety of the dissertation through “trying out” different approaches of such subjectivity in the digital age. Initially, in contrast to the democratic subject I seek to conceptualize, I evoke the Cartesian subject. This Cartesian subject is an autonomous, pre-social and trans-historical being

that is the source of rationality and knowledge. Then, referring to the American tradition of democracy, I turn to John Dewey's conception of the subject as a situated being whose flourishing takes place through inquiry and democratic participation. Viewing the centrality of mediated communication in contemporary democracy as a challenge to the situatedness of the Deweyan subject, I then go to Jürgen Habermas' discursive conception of intersubjectivity and to Chantal Mouffe's idea of the democratic subject who – in order to have a political presence– is bound to others through collective identifications. I then suggest that both Habermas' and Mouffe's respective conceptions of communicative and political action can be viewed as two different forms of collective democratic subjectivity. Subjectivity thus can be both an individual and a collective form of agency. As way out to the impasse posed by the imbrications of communication technologies in our knowledge ourselves as subjects of democracy, I propose Etienne Balibar's reading of Spinoza's subject of democracy as a transindividual force who is immersed in an expanse of intersecting human and non-human forces. This conception of the individual or transindividual results in a view of speech, not as an expression of freedom, but as something to which we are both subject and through which we express our subjectivity.

I decided conduct a theoretical inquiry for this dissertation because I think that in times of rapid technological shifts it is important to stop and reflect upon our assumptions and examine our concepts. As our historical conditions evolve, the ways in which we approach our individual and collective existences need to be constantly re-thought and re-adapted to emerging realities. A theoretical approach allows for connecting 'the bigger picture' to the realities of practice. I interrogate the "who" of education and of democracy

at a given moment in time by examining the thought of the authors presented in this dissertation. Through this I seek not only to inform educational practice, but also to enrich theoretical frameworks for empirical research.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter II locates the relation between communication and democracy that characterizes the American tradition of democracy. I bring forward the idea that the American democratic ideal involves an intersubjective epistemology and I refer to how in the Deweyan model of democracy this intersubjectivity is unsettled by communication technologies. I then introduce Nick Couldry's theorizations on how media institutions are implicated in how we come to "know" ourselves. The chapter ends with a call to re-think democratic subjectivity. In Chapter III, I present Habermas' version of discursive intersubjectivity, its normative implications for democratic theory, and how, in the digital age, his theory of communicative action has been used as a benchmark to evaluate the quality of online interactions for democratic participation. I also show how Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy can be read as a friendly amendment to Habermas' theory. The chapter ends with a call for an approach to democratic subjectivity that goes beyond Habermas' and Mouffe's discursive approaches. In Chapter IV, I argue that although Habermas' and Mouffe's discursive approaches are successful in showing us how communication helps shape collective action, their theories of democracy do not take into account the materiality of the environment in which communication takes place and the forces that shape the public sphere. I maintain that in

order to shift our attention to this materiality we need a more substantial conception of the democratic subject and her relation to her social and material environment. I therefore turn to Spinoza's materialist ontology as the basis of Etienne Balibar's conception of the democratic subject as transindividual, and of the process of freedom of speech as a public good. In Chapter V, by placing Dewey's philosophy of education in conversation with Balibar's thought on freedom of speech, I briefly sketch an approach to civic education and education in general and suggest that the task of education in the digital age is to define, preserve and nourish the process of freedom of speech as a public good. I end the dissertation with four practical recommendations for education in the digital age.

A note on my decision to go back to a the 17th Century philosopher Baruch Spinoza: In this dissertation I turn to Spinoza whose thought – as foundational to modernity– reverberates throughout Western philosophy, albeit more as a “subterranean current”⁴ than as a dominant strain. Knowing that in educational scholarship it is more common to draw from more contemporary authors, and also aware that my decision to start with Habermas and Mouffe, two contemporary writers to end with Spinoza might seem anachronic, I argue that my choice to go back four centuries to look for insights for the challenges we are experiencing today is based on the need I view to think of democracy and freedom of speech differently at a fundamental, ontological level.

Even if Spinoza has been part of the Western philosophical canon, his thought – as Antonio Negri's (1982/2000) description of him as “the savage anomaly” aptly conveys– never fit in with the rest. It is precisely this exceptionality that has made him

⁴As Althusser expressed in his 1976 essay “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter.”

attractive to thinkers seeking alternatives to the dominant modes of thinking within the Western tradition. For many, Spinoza's radically different views on freedom and determinism open up refreshing perspectives that transcend the seemingly ineluctable dualisms of society and nature, mind and body, reason and emotion. In the last decades there has been a renewed interest in Spinoza in English speaking countries⁵ in addition to the prominence he has had in French scholarship since the 1960s.⁶ More recently, scholars have started drawing from both French and the English language scholarship along with what has become to be known as "the affective turn" in the humanities and the social sciences.⁷ Spinoza's thought appears in the fifth chapter of this dissertation as the backdrop to Etienne Balibar's notion of transindividuality and freedom of speech as a transindividual dialogical process.

⁵ Among the authors from the analytic tradition who have published studies of Spinoza we can count Jonathan Bennett, Edwin Curley, Douglas J. Den Uyl, Genevieve Lloyd and Steven Nadler.

⁶ Particularly starting with Alexandre Matheron, Louis Althusser and his students Étienne Balibar, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Macherey as well as with Italian philosopher Antonio Negri.

⁷ Drawing both from Anglo and French scholarship: Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens, Warren Montag, Hasana Sharp, and Brian Massumi. In education: Johan Dahlbeck.

Chapter II

COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRACY

Claims about the potential of the internet for greater democratization have been common since its beginnings. The notion of democracy – broadly described as government by the people– acquires new meaning as communication technologies evolve and the means for collectives to *know* themselves shift. In the digital age, contrary to the era of mass-media, not only large institutions are able to broadcast and publish contents, but ordinary individuals can produce, record and distribute contents to large audiences for a minimal cost. These initial claims about the role of communication technologies in democracy have been nuanced throughout the years by various strands of empirical research, and different insights have been gleaned regarding the role of digitally mediated communication in facilitating democratic practice. Some literature illustrates the potential of the interactive and multimodal version of the internet (web 2.0 technologies) for social, cultural and political participation and collaboration (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2009), for the creation of mass-counter publics (e.g. Castells, 2007), for the constitution of social movements (e.g. Papacharissi, 2015) and for enabling new forms of digital cosmopolitanism (e.g. Zuckerman, 2013). In this chapter, I argue that the digital recasts key questions about the composition of social knowledge and thus challenges traditional

notions of democratic subjectivity. In order to do this, I first locate within the American context a definition of democracy that focuses on the importance of communication for the emergence of knowledge about the public good. I then refer to theorizing about the role of digital media in the constitution of social knowledge. Finally, I outline some of the literature regarding democratic subjectivity in the digital age to conclude with openings for thinking about democratic subjectivity in the digital age that are developed in later chapters.

Defining Democracy

Is democracy about campaigns and elections? Is it about having democratic institutions? Is it a moral outlook? Or a way of life? The definition of democracy has often been vague and differed among disciplines and fields of application. While democracy as plebiscite – which emphasizes personal autonomy and direct participation by direct vote for political decisions through forms such as plebiscites or referendums – is often hastily presented as the basic form of democracy, political theorists have long argued that this form of democracy is undesirable in pluralist societies as it threatens to become systems of majority rule in which the rights of individuals and minorities might be repressed (Abramson, Arterton & Orren, 1988). The canonical definition of democracy among postwar American political scientists is the one provided by Joseph Schumpeter (Mackie, 2009; Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Professing realism, Schumpeter stated that “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter, 1943/2010, p. 269). This

minimalist definition puts competition between leaders at the center of democracy and leaves little room for how the will of the people might be articulated. It implies leaders who somehow know what is best for the people.

While regular elections have been the principal mode of dealing with competition – something inevitable in large and pluralist democracies – it is important to emphasize that elections and majority rule do not constitute democracy by themselves. In a true democracy a number of other mechanisms to influence decision-making should be available to citizens such as associations, social movements and local groupings in which deliberative practices are expected to take place (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

Democracy as Practice

Despite the prominence of Schumpeter's proceduralist view of Democracy, the tradition that strongly characterizes the American ethos is that of civic participation. Just as Thomas Jefferson expressed the importance for each "man" to feel "that he is a participator in the government of affairs not merely at an election, one day in the year, but every day..." (Jefferson, 1816), and in 1838 French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville described participation through independent groups as the defining feature of the American democracy, at the beginning of the 20th century, philosopher John Dewey advocated for a view of democracy in which its practice in everyday life is fundamental. Although Dewey's influence is mostly ascertained by the ample readership, he has had among those interested in philosophy and education, his ideas about the nature of democracy and communication are worth examining today when the evolution in technologies are shifting the ways we communicate.

Dewey viewed democracy not only as a set of administrative procedures and institutions but as an actual form of society comprising a wide range of social relationships. In his view, democracy embodies a dynamic in which individuals contribute creatively to their community and are simultaneously stimulated by their participation in it. Not only does democracy allow for a clearer view of social problems, it is also the site for the expression of individuality. Dewey reiterated this theme throughout his work and, in his later book *The Public and its Problems* (1927/1954), he succinctly articulated his view of democracy as a form of social life:

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and good which are common. (pp. 327-328)

What is original in Dewey's view of democracy is the fundamental role given to what he calls "the public." Differing from the elitist perspective provided by Tocqueville and Jefferson which limited participation to land owning men, Dewey's view of democracy transcends the rigid social structures of the 19th century by presenting the ensemble of citizens not only as people entitled to rights – such as rights to vote in regular elections – but also as intelligent beings capable of reflecting, understanding, deliberating and deciding about matters of public importance. Rather than being supplementary to the electoral game, the emergence of a "public opinion" is central to his view of democracy, and elections should figure as subordinated to it. For him, citizens should not vote as isolated individuals guided by their personal interests at a given moment, but should choose their leaders and positions after having participated actively in public deliberation around the issues at stake.

An Intersubjective Epistemology

Dewey's political philosophy is inscribed in an epistemology which rejected what he considered to be the "spectator theory" of knowledge dominant in western epistemology. For this theory subjects observed a fixed object independent from themselves and sought to arrive at a fixed foundation for knowledge claims (Dewey, 1929, p. 18). Rather than arriving at fixed certainties, Dewey's conception of knowledge emphasized the notion of inquiry by which subjects struggled to solve a problem at hand in order to arrive at a provisional solution to such problem. In the social realm, it is through deliberations that the ideas of the public good emerge. In this sense, Dewey's philosophy is inscribed in the American pragmatic tradition for which intersubjectivity is a defining characteristic. For pragmatists – at least for Dewey and George Herbert Mead, Gert Biesta clarifies – intersubjectivity or *what happens between human beings* precedes and later comes to constitute subjectivity (Biesta, 1998). Biesta (1994) explains that the significance of pragmatism lies in its break with the modern conception of human subjectivity built on individual consciousness. Taken to the political realm, this intersubjectivity is translated into a vision of democracy that is not just a series of administrative mechanisms of governance but the actual realization of the community, understood as the common heritage of ideas, techniques and cultural practices that everybody should be able to access and contribute to transform. A community is truly democratic if within it politics are not in a separate sphere but if it is what gives meaning to a kind of social life characterized by vitality, circulation and communication that gives way to social improvement, reinvention and diversification. In modern societies, this improvement of society also takes place through the mediation of intellectuals, scientists

and journalists who engage in inquiry and later inform and enrich public debate. While these members of the polity are not to be seen as unquestionable authorities, their expertise gives them a prominent role in the debates of a curious and intelligent public.

The intersubjective nature of social knowledge is implied in the central question of this dissertation about the possibility of “knowing ourselves as individual persons and collectives” in the digital age. This intersubjective vision of knowledge is inscribed in the move to question the dominant view in Western thought of the subject as an autonomous, pre-social and trans-historical being that is the source of rationality and knowledge (Biesta, 2009). Biesta explains that this intersubjectivity may be traced back to Hegel who argued that “individuals are in some way constituted by the community” (Biesta, 2015), and explained that this intuition has been followed by a number of theorists not only from the pragmatic tradition but also those inscribed within the discursive turn. I would like to argue that this intersubjective vision of democracy presupposes a certain degree of communicative transparency – which in modern democracies becomes increasingly complex by a range of institutions and actors – and that it is therefore crucial to examine the way in which communication technologies which are involved in facilitating communications at a level beyond the immediate community operate in relation to this view of democracy. In this chapter I focus on the role of media institutions in democracy. In the next section of this chapter I discuss the possibility of this kind of intersubjectivity in the digital age.

Might Democracy Have an Epistemic Function in the Digital Age?

In broad terms, in this dissertation I follow the view that democracy has an epistemic function, as it allows collectives to elucidate what might be the common good. In this endeavor communication is central. As I wonder what this might look like in today's age ubiquitous technological mediation, this section of the chapter will deal with how mediation has been theorized in relation to communication. Despite the interest of Dewey's intersubjective model of democracy, the kind of communication he had in mind seems devoid of power differentials, structural inequalities and – above all – unmediated. While he was not nostalgic about an era of unfettered face-to-face communication, as for him the multiplication of modes of communication enabled by technological progress was a positive development in and of itself, Dewey did express concern about the “diffusion” of the American public by centralized and mediated forms of publicity (Dewey, 1927). Explaining that “in no two ages or places is there the same public” (Dewey, 1927, p. 33), for him, the deliberations at local town hall meetings were being “eclipsed” by the centralized structures of the press through which mediated spheres of publics emerged serving the power and the “lust of possession” that was “in the hands of the officers and agencies.”

In this section I present two approaches to the influence of digital media in the kind of communication Dewey's view of democracy presupposes. The first approach presents a view of digital technologies as being replete with possibilities for facilitating equitable participation through a variety of modes of expression. The second approach suggests the examination of the power of media institutions with regards to the construction of collective perceptions of social reality.

Participation in the Digital Age

In its early days, the internet was heralded as a democratizing tool that would give voice to economically, culturally and socially marginalized groups. In opposition to mass media – characterized by its top-down concentration of content production and distribution– the internet seemed to provide a decentralized model in which individuals had the possibility of getting their message out without the need of major material resources. More directly related to the kind of collective learning described by Dewey, the accessibility to both knowledge repositories and to physically distant people that the digital allows for have been said to facilitate the formation of *communities of practice*. This concept – which is rooted in the American pragmatism¹ – underscores how learning takes place through practice and participation. Communities of practice can be defined as naturally emergent or purposefully created communities in which, through a process of sharing information and experiences, members with different levels of expertise learn about a particular domain of common interest (Wenger, 1999). Moreover, at a larger cultural and social level, with the widespread social use of digital technologies, the related idea of *participatory culture* as put forward by Henry Jenkins and colleagues (2006) has also become extremely influential in literature related to communication, media studies and education. By *participatory culture* Jenkins and colleagues refer to how consumers, fans, users or audiences are involved in the creation and dissemination of media contents such as sharing images or videos on Facebook, posting short texts on Twitter or Weibo, or contributing to a Wikipedia entry. For them, these social platforms

¹ See C.S Pierce's concept of the "community of inquiry" (Shields, 2003), as well as Dewey's theory of learning through occupation (Wallace, 2007).

in digital media provide “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 3).

Coinciding with several internet analysts of the earlier internet (See Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2011a; Tapscott & Williams, 2007), Jenkins views web 2.0 technology – the more interactive and social version of the World Wide Web – as having made society more democratic (Jenkins, 2006). In fact, he sees popular culture as “preparing the way for a more meaningful public culture” (Jenkins, 2006) and, in his later work, he and Sangita Shresthova develop the notion of *Fan activism* which they define as:

Forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within a fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture. (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012, p. 5)

Although these empirically informed approaches to digital participation provide rich and nuanced accounts of the online practices of youth and how a sense of political agency might take shape in the digital age, they fall short on accounting for the larger economic, cultural and political realities that structure the flow of communications in modern democracies. For instance, Christian Fuchs critiques Jenkins’ use of the concept “participation” arguing that it fails to include questions of ownership (Fuchs, 2017). He contrasts Jenkins’ cultural model of participation to the political studies concept of *participatory democracy* which, for Fuchs, takes into account “the ownership of platforms/companies, collective decision-making, profit, class and the distribution of material benefits” (Fuchs, 2017, p. 55). Like Fuchs, José Van Dijck and David Nieborg

(2009) argue for more critical awareness of the social and economic implications of the new trends in media industries, having stated that participatory culture as defined by Jenkins “does not yield any power and control over the means of production” (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 33). These critiques foreground the larger systems within which communication takes place in which the power of communication and others forms of power are in tension. This leads us into the second approach of the role of the digital in processes of collective “knowing.” This approach attempts to provide a systematic view of the power of media institutions in the construction of a shared reality.

The Power of Media Institutions

Despite the myriad possibilities for greater communication across geographies and the way digital technologies facilitate the formation of communities, Dewey’s concerns about the power of “officers and agencies” have been echoed since. While these critiques found greater development in Europe, especially within the Frankfurt School, I argue that with the media, the kind of intersubjectivity sought by American pragmatists undergoes a structural shift: what Dewey theorized as an intersubjective endeavor becomes an asymmetrical exchange between individuals and institutions. The implications for power dynamics that this presupposes are usefully theorized by Nick Couldry (2015) when he says that the power of media institutions resides in their ability to create a shared reality that later becomes recognized as “ours.” Noting that communication has always played a role in the forms of coordination that modern institutions rely on, he refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s writings about how modern media institutions have come to replace religious institutions in their “power of constructing reality” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 166).

For Couldry, the way we make sense of who “we” are as a society is nourished by our everyday uses of media. In order to conceptualize the way we “know” the social in an era of mediated communication he suggests three myths by which media participates in our symbolic construction of the social. A sociologist, Couldry borrows the term *myth* from anthropology in an effort to describe the underlying patterns by which we, as societies, make sense and organize assumptions about what knowledge, expertise and information are more valuable than others, and give us a sense of our social realities. For Couldry, each one of these myths builds on each other and clouds our ability to imagine, describe and act within the social in alternative ways. Before explaining what each one of these myths consists in, it is helpful to underscore how Couldry – in what I would say a very Deweyan manner – gives a foundational role to communication in the constitution of the social, of *human life*, which can be seen in his definition of media:

“Media” are, first of all, technological means for producing, circulating and receiving communications. We would have no media unless human life were constituted, in a crucial respect, by communications: by the exchanges of signs that enable acts of communications to make sense, to accumulate over time as meaning, as knowledge. (Couldry, 2017, p. 3)

The media that Couldry is interested in is the one that developed in the 20th century in parallel with the growth of institutions of the modern state, industrialized economy and “stable infrastructures and networks for the production and circulation of communication packages to a state’s whole population” (p. 3).

The first myth in the construction of a shared reality that Couldry mentions is the *myth of the mediated center* that he defines as the belief that there is a center to the social world, and that -in some sense– the media “speaks” for that center. By this myth, he refers to an implicit pattern of social organization by which societies make sense of

things as if certain types of expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and the reality of social life is reflected by the media as having privileged access to something happening “where things happen.” Just as newscasts might tell us that what we are watching is “what’s going on”, and TV dramas provide us with “images, representations, of what living now is like,” (Williams, 1975, p. 9) this myth works to organize our perception of a social reality that we, in an extended polity, would not be able to perceive by ourselves, that is, without the media. While this myth takes us back to an era of mass media before the internet, its force still persists despite the many questions we might now ask about when and why media are telling us that *their* stories are central to our understanding of our society. Couldry explains that media institutions are still trying to tell us – perhaps more insistently in an environment of competing voices – that *they* are the ones with a privileged view of the story of what is *actually* happening in our shared reality. Nowadays, however, despite the persistent usefulness of this first myth, for Couldry it does not by itself account for what media institutions do in relation to our perception of the social.²

Couldry explains that in the last three decades external forces have reshaped the media and media institutions and this has resulted in what Rainie and Wellman (2012, p. ix) have called “the triple revolution” consisting of 1. the internet as a means of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications; 2. the continuous availability of media contents in our lives through mobile and other devices of communication; and 3. the intensified use of social networking media. Within this triple revolution, Couldry

² And it would be fair to add that it is perhaps a break in these perceptions that has precipitated the political crises currently occurring (e.g. Brexit, lost trust in traditional political parties).

explains that social media platforms like Facebook bring about a new perception of centrality, that does not come from media institutions but that is mediated by “us.” This has profound implications for media as social institutions since we cannot separate any more media institutions that produce and distribute institutional contents from communications infrastructures for interpersonal communications. Social media is not substituting mass media institutions as the later are very much present in the former. Couldry advances that contrary to the popular view that social media is a grassroots response to mass media, it represents a completely new business model for media infrastructures. With this new way of organizing social life around these media, a new myth emerges about how, when using platforms like Facebook, we perceive the collectivities that we form. He refers to this as a myth of a reality mediated by the natural collectivity of “us”, a *myth of us*. Beyond this feeling of a reality that “naturally” results from “us”, the contents to which users are exposed on the two most popular social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) do not correspond to the posts of other users presented in chronological order. Algorithms of undisclosed formulas track users and collect data from their mediated interactions in order to determine what contents users are presented with as well as the order in which they are presented. This trend is inscribed in the omnipresent quantification of social life (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013) that has resulted in what is commonly referred to as “Big Data” to which Couldry dedicates his third myth. Before explaining this myth, it is helpful to provide a definition of Big Data. boyd and Crawford (2012) define big data as:

- a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of:
1. *Technology*: maximizing computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyze, link, and compare large data sets.
 2. *Analysis*: drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make

economic, social, technical, and legal claims.

3. *Mythology*: the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy. (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 665)

Couldry echoes the mythological aspect of media institutions in his third *myth of Big Data* by which he refers to how the mythological character of the claims about what Big Data can do for understanding the social world. Indeed, Big Data “reframes key questions about the constitution of knowledge” (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 665), and raises concerns about democratic agency. Collecting, analyzing and using Big Data requires considerable financial resources and many of the platforms involved in these activities reserve their right to exclusive access to the data they collect. Couldry warns us about basis on which big corporations, institutions and governments that have access to such data may claim that they are telling us “the way things are” and what counts as social knowledge.

As I hope to have conveyed in this first section, opposing dynamics in the construction of social knowledge on which political action gathers legitimacy result from the widespread imbrication of digital media in our lives: one consisting of intensified exchanges, a multiplication of forms of communicative affordances (e.g. multimodality) and an unprecedented variety of social formations through which social learning may take place. Another characterized by increasingly sophisticated means for collecting and analyzing data by a small number of increasingly powerful people and institutions. These two dynamics presuppose an understanding democratic subjectivity as a continuum – of which the two ends of the spectrum consist in (a) democratic subjects who, with access to increased modes of communication and possibilities of assembly, are active participants

in the construction of their social reality and possible agents of change and (b) democratic subjects who, because of the embedded structures of media in their daily lives, are unwitting generators of abundant data that can be used by those with access to capital, technological and political power to shape political and social reality. This widening of the notion of democratic subjectivity requires further exploration. In the next section, I discuss different attempts to re-evaluate notions of democratic subjectivity in the digital age.

Re-defining Democratic Subjectivity in the Digital Age

If the events and technical advancements of the early 20th century led scholars on both sides of the Atlantic to question the foundations of democratic subjectivity, in the 21st century political theorists have been slow to acknowledge the influence of these digital communication technologies on political and democratic life despite their widespread presence for several decades. Indeed, most research regarding democracy and the digital has taken place within the disciplinary strands of communication theory and media studies, with lively scholarly conversations about civic participation, identity and the affordances of online platforms for democratic practice. I here concur with Hans Asenbaum (2018) when he argues that digital communication reconfigures democratic subjectivity and that we should be asking ourselves how we can articulate these reconfigured subjectivities within a political theory.

Asenbaum suggests that theorizing about democracy and the digital may be broadly divided into two different approaches: a discursive approach and a materialist one. Each one of these approaches has different implications for how we might understand subjects of democracy: On the one hand, the discursive one, influenced by the

discursive turn in the social sciences, posits the internet as a discursive space of disembodied interactions. It presupposes a subject of democracy that is discursively constituted rather than tethered to a physical identity. On the other hand, the materialist approach gives prominence to the materiality of computers, infrastructures, the distribution of capital and resources as well as to the embodied reality of the subject. This approach considers subjects of democracy as embodied beings who exist within material contexts. I suggest that both the discursive and the materialist approach imply different forms of intersubjective epistemologies and that both can contribute to a conception of the democratic subject that is useful in the digital age. In this section of this Chapter I only summarily outline these two approaches as they will be further developed in Chapters III and IV.

The discursive approach has been more prominent in scholarship taking place during the early years of the internet but – as I will argue in Chapter III – still has purchase today, particularly in what pertains the shift from a modern subjectivity of individual conscience to an epistemology of intersubjectivity. The Internet, in its first iterations, primarily allowed for the transmission of text and was often portrayed as a space of disembodiment that facilitated fluid identities and allowed a so-called “meeting of minds.”

In the 1990s, communication theorists conceptualized the subjects of what they termed *cyberdemocracy* as disembodied selves that “typed themselves into being.” At the time, poststructuralism and the linguistic turn had also become prevalent theoretical orientations in the social sciences. Poststructuralist concepts of discursive reality construction, identity performance, and the power of discourse fit well with online

communication– which then was predominantly textual. The anonymity of textual communication raised hopes for the realization of a space of democratic deliberation that would be free from racial, gendered or ethnic power differentials. A recurring theme of investigation was how internet users experimented with roles and identities online. This evoked an idea of subjects of democracy who, by using the internet, were able to access a liberating space of interaction in which the identities denoted by their physical attributes could be bypassed and discursively constituted identities were brought to the fore. For instance, in *Life on the Screen*, through ethnographies of Multi-User Domains (MUDs), psychologist Sherry Turkle observed that internet users “use the anonymity of cyberspace to project alternate personae” (Turkle, 1995/2011, p. 216), and that by adopting alternate identities users were able to explore undeveloped aspects of their personality. Furthermore, in *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold (1993) argued that the internet was a democratizing force as it decentralized public discourse that was previously constrained by time and space. In line with these views, and more explicitly optimistic about the potential of the internet to become a space of deliberation devoid of the burdens of embodied communication, in his 1997 essay “Cyberdemocracy: The internet and the Public Sphere” Mark Poster expressed:

On the internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogue, not as an act of pure consciousness... [This] does connote a ‘democratization’ of subject constitution because the acts of course are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications. (Poster, 1997, p. 222)

Coinciding with the more multimodal and interactive versions of the internet, the rise of the “internet of things”³ as well as with the transition from an open and relatively diverse internet to one characterized by the dominance of a handful of powerful corporations, recent scholarship has shifted its focus from discursive construction to the materiality of things. New materialism,⁴ object-oriented ontology (OOO),⁵ material feminism,⁶ and post humanism⁷ are but some strands of theorizing centered on embodiment and physicality currently being used to analyze and understand digitally mediated interaction. Alaimo, Hekman and Hekman (2008), calling to take into account the materiality of the human body and nature, judge poststructuralists’ sole focus on discourse as insufficient: “We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes living experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance and consideration” (Alaimo, Hekman & Hekman, 2008, p. 4).

In today’s digital landscape, the materiality of the body is foregrounded increasingly through images, videos and immediate forms of communication as well as through the proximity of mobile devices to our bodies and daily habits. Furthermore, this proximity elicits an anticipation of embodied imagery during the act of communication: as we imagine those who we message, we anticipate where a person might be or what she might be doing (is she driving? Is she in a meeting? Perhaps he is changing the baby and

³ The **Internet of things (IoT)** refers to the network of physical objects, home appliances, vehicles and other items equipped with software, sensors, actuators, and network connectivity through which these objects connect and exchange data.

⁴ See for instance the work of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Manuel DeLanda

⁵ See Graham Harman’s work.

⁶ See the work of Christine Delphy Rosemary Hennessy and Stevi Jackson.

⁷ See N. Katherine Hayles’ work.

left his phone on the kitchen counter). These images might include bodily posture or even the location of their device in relation their body. As expressed by legal theorist Julie Cohen, this physicality is intensified with the rise of the internet of things, by which, not only computers are networked but also a multiplicity of objects involved in our everyday lives:

Data flows escape the obvious bounds of the networked computer and cross into and out of homes, cars, personal accessories, and public spaces by many avenues... Networked space is neither empty nor abstract, and is certainly not separate; it is a network of connections wrapped around every artifact and human being. (Cohen, 2012, p. 46)

For her, technological mediation alters bodily perception resulting in novel democratic subjectivities as well as perceptions of physical bodies.

Conclusion

The transition from an epistemology based on individual consciousness to an intersubjective one has been a major development in western thought. Whereas within philosophy of consciousness it is assumed that thought precedes our encounter with the world and others making them objects of our experience and knowledge, intersubjectivity assumes a co-creation of the world. Of course, Dewey and the pragmatists were not alone in proposing that knowledge is constituted collectively and the result of symbolic interaction, as the discursive turn in the social sciences has taken various forms such as those that follow postmodernist thinkers. This move from consciousness to intersubjectivity has opened new ways of thinking about the subject as well as the relationship between the subject with other subjects. In modern complex and plural societies, the translation of such intersubjectivity into normative practices and institutions

poses a variety of challenges. Thinking about intersubjectivity has taken on a variety of forms which can be broadly characterized as discursive and materialist. The kind of intersubjectivity underpinning a pragmatic vision of democratic legitimacy is challenged by the mediating role of a variety of actors and institutions existing in modern democracies. Moreover, the affordances of communication support – be them physical objects such as books or newspapers or digital devices – shape in significant ways how this intersubjectivity takes place. In the next chapter discursive perspectives of intersubjectivity will be analyzed in relation to the realities of the digital age.

Chapter III

DELIBERATION, AGONISM AND DEMOCRACY

As I argued in Chapter II, in the digital age, democratic subjectivity has mainly been conceptualized in discursive or materialist terms. This chapter presents the discursive approach of Jürgen Habermas who, throughout his career, has tried to articulate how human interests that find expression in the social realm of day-to-day interactions can translate into political, legal and institutional realms. Just as for Dewey and the American Pragmatists, his inquiry is inscribed within a shift from an epistemology of individual consciousness to one of intersubjectivity (Biesta, 1998).

Habermas views the project of Enlightenment as unachieved and aims to provide theory of “communicative reason” to counter what he considers the one-sidedness of the instrumental reason that drives capitalist modernization.

In this chapter, in order to elucidate what this approach to intersubjectivity might look like in our contemporary reality of ubiquitous digital mediation, as a first step I present Habermas’ thought. By situating his work in the context of the Frankfurt School, I intend to make evident his commitment to redeeming a project of Enlightenment through his proposal of an intersubjective theory of rationality different from instrumental rationality. Then, I briefly explain his theory of communicative action which

serves as the basis for what is of interest in this dissertation: his theory of deliberative democracy. At the end of the section, I present critiques to his model and I outline Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy which – although written as a critique to Habermas' deliberative model – can be viewed as a friendly amendment to his theory.

In a second step, I describe how these theories have been applied to analyze contemporary digitally mediated forms of communication. I illustrate how both approaches to democratic subjectivity are necessary and complementary, but how they are limited by their exclusive focus on the discursive realm. I use the example of the #MeToo movement ¹ to illustrate how both deliberative and agonistic dynamics taking place in the digital realm enter the political sphere. I end the chapter by suggesting that a materialist view of democratic subjectivity that integrates both structural and subjective conditions would be better suited to shape an educational philosophy for the digital age.

Deliberative and Agonistic Politics

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action

Despite being just a child during World War II, Jürgen Habermas was deeply impacted by Germany's post-war confrontation with its Nazi past and the Holocaust. His scholarly work and public scholarship are often viewed as an attempt to theorize how to prevent the recurrence of such horrors (Bevir, 2010, p. 587). Habermas views Nazism as a form of irrationality that used technological progress in a regime that spiraled into genocide. Instrumental reason – which is only concerned with the most efficient way of arriving at an end without questioning the end itself – was essential for the industrial-

¹ The #MeToo movement started in 2017 as a way to make visible the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace. See the second section of this chapter to further description.

scale murder of over six million Jews, Roma and other minorities. This mass murder required instrumental rationality in that it needed the extensive bureaucratic capacity of the modern state for logistical planning, railway development and coordination, policing organization, etc. Thousands of ordinary people participated in this endeavor without giving much thought to its atrocious end-goal.

Despite questioning instrumental rationality, Habermas is still convinced that the ideals of Enlightenment are worth keeping, thus the Habermasian project is guided by the commitment to find a definition of rationality that goes beyond the boundaries of instrumental reason. With this, Habermas seeks to inform how to conceptualize the institutions of the modern state without giving up to the skepticism favored by many in the aftermath of the second World War (i.e. postmodernism).

Habermas' work is also an extension and a response to the Critical Theory developed at the Frankfurt School in the first half of the 20th century. This school of philosophy was established in Germany in the 1930s and aimed not only to critique but also – in a neo-Marxist² spirit– to *change* relations of domination within culture and society through the tools of the social sciences and humanities. With human emancipation as a central goal, thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School took up the Marxist concern with the conditions that allow for social change through rational social institutions.

The rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s seemed to contradict the expectation that a proletarian revolution would follow the years of laissez-faire capitalism characterized by domination and alienation that Marxists considered to be inherent to

² Following Marx's famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx, 1845/1972)

capitalist relations of production. German National Socialism, state capitalism and mass culture did not lead into the kind of emancipatory social revolution expected by early Marxists but rather ended up in totalitarianism and fascism. This contradiction led first generation Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to express their ambivalence towards what might be the fundamental source of human domination and to question the actual possibility of human emancipation. Seeing how technical development and the rationalization of modes of governance had facilitated the horrors of the Holocaust and the authoritarian rule that took place in the first half of the 20th century, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) they articulated a scathing critique of instrumental reason and its emphasis on the domination of nature. As instrumental reason is only concerned with determining the best or most efficient means to achieve a given goal without reasoning about the ends in themselves, this type of reason turns Enlightenment against itself. Rather than viewing science and technology as emancipatory – as Marx did – Adorno and Horkheimer draw on Max Weber's concerns of class reification through bureaucratization.

Weber saw the modern state and the capitalist institutional framework as composed by subsystems of instrumental rational action divided along class lines. Within such framework technology becomes for Adorno and Horkheimer a means of social repression and alienation as people are not viewed in their full human complexity but only as means towards an end (Habermas, 1984, p. 144). Their assessment was bleak and seemed like a dead-end for the perspective of human emancipation within the framework of the modern state. In their words, although “the Enlightenment has always aimed at

liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty ... the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1973/2002, p. 3).

This critique of instrumental reason³ was taken up by Habermas, but, rather than declaring the project of Enlightenment moot, he reframed the question of rationality. If the Enlightenment philosophers had placed reason as the central source of authority rather than divine authority, the definition of reason came to be reduced to instrumental rationality, the version most closely linked with scientific progress. By linking rationality to action, Habermas proposed another kind of reason (Bevir, 2010). Through this link he proposed a distinction between one kind of rationality connected to a type of action that seeks the most effective means of achieving an end (instrumental reason) and another kind of rationality linked to another type of action in which subjects seek to reach an agreement so as to act together (what he came to call communicative reason). By making this distinction, Habermas was able to detach the idea of Enlightenment from mere instrumental rationality and to present it as a project about actions in which subjects seek to come to an agreement to act together. This way of conceiving reason allows for a more robust idea of progress as these agreed-upon actions presuppose the input of individual people in determining their ends. By expanding the meaning of rationality beyond its instrumental version, Habermas presents Enlightenment as an unfinished project.

Habermas’ view of communication as essential to a moral project of reason may be better understood if we set it against the backdrop of Immanuel Kant’s formulation of the use of public reason in his immensely consequential essay *What is Enlightenment?* (Kant, 1784/2013). In this essay, Kant defines Enlightenment as “man’s release from his

³ I use the terms ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ interchangeably. The German original of Habermas’ work uses ‘Rationalität’ which can be translated either as ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’.

self-incurred tutelage” (Kant, 1784/2013). Tutelage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Kant tells us that Enlightenment is about having the courage to think for ourselves rather than relying on the authority of tradition. This autonomy of thinking presupposes that we *all* have access to reason and therefore, we should use it by engaging in free and public discourse to contribute to the advancement of society. In this he implies both that at an individual level we are capable of thinking for ourselves, and that at the level of humanity we tend towards a perfectly just order (Habermas, 1989, p. 104).

Kant differentiates between the *private* use of reason from the *public* use of reason. Whereas a person speaking as her function in society permits her to engage in what Kant calls *private reason*, a person speaking according to her reason speaks freely in what he calls *public reason*. In this way, the officer – when speaking in that role– must speak according to the obligation required by her function, even if she questions it. However, when speaking as a free citizen, that same person may publicly express her discontent with the legislation that guides her obligations as an officer and consequently help improve the legislation itself. For Kant, the free expression of individual reason is paramount to the project of Enlightenment, but so are institutions that – while fulfilling their missions and giving stability and security to the polity– must also be open to evolution informed by public opinion.

Habermas follows this line of thought that views the project of Enlightenment – and therefore also of the modern state – as one dependent on both free public reasoning and institutions. His investigations into the possibility of basing moral rules and legal frameworks on discursive interactions started with a historical inquiry. In his habilitation

thesis,⁴ the seminal *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* – published in German in 1962 and gaining him public notoriety for the first time – Habermas explained that during the eighteenth century a bourgeois *public sphere* developed amidst European bourgeois salon and café culture: economically rising and literate but politically marginalized, the bourgeoisie would gather in cafés, salons, clubs, masonic lodges and other spaces to discuss matters of collective interest that also circulated through the press and literary works (Habermas, 1989). This public sphere emerged as a space in which private individuals came together as a public to exchange views and opinions in order to counteract the despotic regimes under which they lived. For Habermas, this is the closest expression to the ideal public sphere there has ever been in the West, as it was characterized by the features, he considers essential to a deliberative democracy: quality of discourse and quantity of participation (Calhoun, 1992). In this bourgeois public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries, according to Habermas, the merits of a person's argument were more important than the person's identity.⁵ Through these forums, public political will was informed helping shape collective self-determination eventually through institutionalized deliberating bodies such as parliament (Habermas, 1989).

However, for Habermas, this apogée of the public sphere came to an end with the development of industrial capitalism and mass media. He theorized these developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as resulting in the blurring of the boundaries between private and public interests. The cultural realm ceased to fulfill its critical role as

⁴ In Germany, the habilitation is a post-doctoral thesis that grants access to full professorship.

⁵ I will later discuss how the exclusion of women and people from the working classes from the public sphere has been a prominent critique to Habermas' notion of the public sphere.

ideas and artistic expressions became commodities subject to the logics of mass media production and consumption (Habermas, 1989). Furthermore, he explained that, as monopolies developed and economic élites could use mass media to manipulate public opinion, the public was eroded as it went from being private individuals engaging in rational-critical debate about the public good to being an aggregate of mass consumers, atomized and pursuing purely private interests (Habermas, 1989).

Habermas' later work is a formal attempt to propose a model of reason based on the potential of human rationality as expressed through the everyday use of language. This attempt is inscribed in a shift from a paradigm of individual subjectivity to one of intersubjectivity. The Cartesian paradigm of the solitary thinker presupposed by Kant and also underpinning Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimist assessment of Enlightenment reason had been challenged by G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel argued that society is not a force limiting individually cogitating beings but that individuals are in some ways constituted by society (Biesta, 2006, p. 36). In response to this challenge to individual consciousness Habermas focuses on language, not as a syntactic or semantic system but as language in use (Habermas, 1984). This approach to language, which is influenced by the American pragmatist tradition⁶, allowed him to propose a language-based theory of the social developed in his two-volume work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984).

However, first, Habermas proposed an *ideal speech situation* to serve as a model of communication that would result in decisions that are made without coercion.

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
- 2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion.

⁶ Habermas had been introduced to American Pragmatists by his friend and colleague Karl-Otto Apel. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* he mostly draws from George Herbert Mead's theory of communication.

2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

2c. Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.

3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2). (Habermas, 1990, p. 43)

Despite Habermas' revision of this *ideal speech situation* and his later formulation of communicative reason, it is the former that has been mostly used by communication scholars to evaluate the quality of an interaction.

To understand Habermas' theory of communicative action it is helpful to review a key differentiation he makes about the social world. This differentiation concerns the realm of everyday interactions which he calls *lifeworld*, and the realm of bureaucratic exchanges linked to government or macrosystems such as the market which he calls *system*. The *lifeworld* consists in the daily life experiences of people that provide a resource of common background knowledge upon which references are drawn for communication. In this realm, communicative action – which is action geared towards mutual understanding – takes place spontaneously and regularly. This is because the lifeworld contributes to a favorable environment for communicative action in two ways: first, it acts as “a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation for use in their interpretive efforts.” (Habermas, 1990, p. 135); and second, within the lifeworld solidarity between groups is built through its common values and people's realization of their interdependence.⁷ On the other hand, the *system* consists of market and administrative institutions that structure social life through the mediations of money and

⁷ Here Habermas follows Durkheim's theory of social solidarity. Durkheim differentiates between mechanical solidarity which depends on people's perceived similarities and organic solidarity which is based on the division of labor and people's realization of their interdependence (Habermas, 1984).

power. Action within the system follows the logic of instrumental reason, that is, the most efficient means towards an end.

For his theory of communicative action Habermas takes inspiration from the kind of collective action that spontaneously takes place within the lifeworld. This action depends on the achievement of mutual understanding. In everyday endeavors, in order to engage in action, we do not use others as means to an end, but we communicate with them in order to reach a common understanding. For Habermas, human beings are by definition language users and use language not only to get things done, but also to make validity claims in front of others (Habermas, 1984). These others judge our validity claims and depending on their agreement, we are able to move forward to get something done together. Habermas suggests that this is a form of rationality that can be used as a way of evaluating the actions of institutions. Rather than having to rely solely on instrumental reason (i.e. whether an institution is able to reach its goals in the most efficient way possible), he suggests that communicative reason can give us an alternative for our analysis of action.

Since in modern societies the lifeworld in which communicative action is sustained and the systems that rely on instrumental action have become differentiated, these two must interact with each other and keep each other in check. While systems make complex societies work more efficiently, Habermas warns us that in many cases the instrumental logic of systems are in conflict with the interests of people and therefore systems come to “colonize” the lifeworld. When systems come to dominate the lifeworld, power and money – the ends of instrumental reason that governs systems – replace the

outcomes of communicative reason. When this happens, the result is anomie and alienation: people do not feel that they are a part of the forces governing their lives.

Habermas explains that his deliberative model can be differentiated from the liberal conception of democracy that gives priority to individual autonomy – each one decides what is best for themselves – as well as to the republican model which focuses on a previously established common ethical project based on trust and solidarity. The deliberative model that Habermas proposes emphasizes citizen participation in the pursuit of consensus about common goals.

While Habermas' proposal of arriving to laws and moral principles in a participatory manner offers a formal way of legitimating these, the assumptions of his ideal speech situation have been widely criticized, most importantly because of the abstract nature of the subject presupposed in his theory and the central role he gives to the bourgeois public as if it were the only public. Nancy Fraser – one of the most prominent critics of the Habermasian idea of the public sphere – argues that its historical ideal version reposed on a reduced idea of the public as one composed by the bourgeois stratum which because of mechanisms of differentiation could have never been an entirely inclusive space as it implied a strict division between the public and the private, a division that has historically served to exclude women's experiences and participation from the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Fraser explains that gendered expectations for women to serve as wife, mother and domestic worker in a sphere traditionally deemed as "private" have ensured their historical exclusion from the Habermasian public sphere.⁸

⁸ In her paper, Fraser, based on Joan Landes' historiographical revisions, argues that although 17th and 18th century salons – particularly in France– were known to be held by women, the republican salons that Habermas proposes as corresponding to his ideal public sphere emerged in response to these more women-friendly spaces that were deemed as too "aristocratic," "artificial" and "effeminate."

She expresses that the Habermasian public sphere requires the problematic bracketing of identities that ignores systemic power differentials and fails to recognize the existence of multiple discursive spheres in late-modern societies. Furthermore, she argues that the entirely rational, disembodied ideal of discussion favors a patriarchal subjectivity as it leaves little to no room for those with non-normative experiences such as those of women and minorities (Fraser, 1990).

Fraser's response to Habermas identifies important shortcomings of Habermas' conception of the public sphere and problematizes issues of recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 1995; 2000). Her argument for taking into account power relations within the lifeworld has served to launch further theorizing about who gets to be included in public debates, what gets to be heard, how, when and in what terms it gets to be heard. However, her proposition of a plurality of counter publics (rather than a singular public sphere) does not go far enough in conceptualizing how these publics and counter publics interact, and her work retains the Habermasian goal of reaching consensus through talk in order for an extended version of the public sphere to mediate between society and government.

The above section sought to present one of the most generative normative intersubjective theories of democracy. As we will see further on in this chapter Habermas' ideal speech situation has been widely used as a frame of analysis of online interactions. However, these days there is increased polarization in the United States and in the world within institutionalized settings (e.g. congressional gridlock has skyrocketed within the last 10 years⁹) as well as among political elites (Poole, 2007; Shor &

⁹ An article on *The Economist* interpreting a 2014 empirical study conducted by Sarah Binder from the Brookings Institution noted that "Between 1947 and 2000, for instance, conference agreements averaged

McCarty, 2011) and the mass electorate (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Prior, 2013). Therefore, normative theories that posit consensus as the desired outcome of public discussions seem disconnected from the realities of contemporary democracy. In response to this, agonistic perspectives which propose viewing the political arena as essentially confrontational have gathered attention in the past few years as an alternative to deliberative democracy (Mouffe, 1999). One such approach that has also been said to aptly reflect the dynamics of the digital age is Chantal Mouffe's model of agonistic democracy (Papacharissi, 2014). While retaining the centrality of discourse in the constitution of the social, Mouffe takes issue with Habermas' ideal speech situation. She argues against the possibility of reaching consensus in contemporary plural societies in which a variety of collective identifications exist. In the next section I present Mouffe's theory of agonistic politics and the way it places what she calls "the political" at the center of democracy.

Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Politics

Just like the Habermasian project is inscribed in desire to address questions of human emancipation, Chantal Mouffe's agonistic politics can also be traced to an attempt to respond to the insufficiencies of Marxist thought. Mouffe's early work, carried out with the late Ernesto Laclau, expresses sharp divergences with the basic tenets of Marxism, particularly the central role given to capitalist relations of production in precluding human emancipation. In their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,

about 100 per congress [sic]. Between 2001 and 2012, however, the number was just over 20. This number plummeted even further during the 112th Congress, from 2011 to 2013, when only seven final agreements were reached via conference committee." ("Political Gridlock," Sept. 22, 2014, 4:52 PM), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2014/09/political-gridlock>

drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony as well as on post-structuralism, Laclau and Mouffe critiqued aspects of classical Marxist thought, especially essentialized class identity. They considered the Marxist subject to be overdetermined by class structures, a view that seemed disconnected from the divergent interests expressed by feminist, ecological, worker, anti-colonial and anti-racist movements of the mid-century. In an attempt to address this excessive reification of the classed subject, Laclau and Mouffe proposed a discourse-based understanding of the social, in which collective identifications take place through linguistic differentiations.¹⁰ Viewing the symbolic realm as a site of competition between irreconcilable hegemonic discourses, Laclau and Mouffe insisted on the need for left-wing movements to form coalitions between different interest groups (e.g. between workers, feminists, anti-racists, ecologists, etc.) in order to articulate unified discourses so as to counter dominant ones.

Mouffe's later work, is still guided by the objective of granting political viability to a leftist project. However, rather than adopting a liberal stance to counter the reified structures that conservatism perpetuates she focuses on the need for taking into account power in the political arena. She does this by reacting to Rawls' and Habermas' conception of consensus-seeking deliberative democracy, and proposes instead an agonistic view of democracy.

Mouffe argues that despite deliberative democrats' urge to propose an alternative model of democracy to the prevalent "aggregative" model that fosters an instrumentalist view of politics, their vision is too rationalist and fails to account for the realities of

¹⁰ They deconstruct Saussure's idea of structure in which the meaning of a sign is fixed through the differentiation with what the sign does not mean. They suggest that signs are articulated into larger units of discourse, and that these units of discourse may be closed from one another.

politics, namely the crucial role played by emotions and collective forms of identification. Drawing from social psychoanalysis, she explains that wanting to extricate conflict from the democratic process (as deliberative democrats propose) only leads to more destructive antagonistic conflicts (Mouffe, 2005).

Mouffe's critique of the deliberative project is based on two accounts: First, similarly to Fraser, she takes issue with how Rawls and Habermas separate "public" matters – deemed to be acceptable in deliberative discussions seeking to reach consensus– from "private" matters which remain in the realm of plurality and non-reconcilable difference. Second – beyond Fraser – Mouffe notes the failure of deliberative democrats to adequately address the tension between political autonomy and private autonomy underlying democratic and liberal ideals respectively.¹¹ She explains that the individual rights that the liberal tradition¹² defends are necessarily in tension with the logic of democracy which rests upon the notion of a shared idea of the public good. In order to come up with a theory to bridge between these differences she provocatively draws from the German conservative political theorist Carl Schmitt, who rejects the individualism that Mouffe says characterizes liberal thought. This way she underscores the precedence that collective identifications take in the political arena. These collective identifications are formed through the establishment of a "we" that exists in contrast to a "they." In stark contrast with Habermas' conception of political debate as an exploration of morality, Schmitt expresses that we can understand "the political" "only in the context

¹¹ Although the association of private autonomy with liberalism and political autonomy to democracy is useful, but I think it belongs more to a continental terminology. I prefer to problematize the definition of liberalism as something that can give priority to political autonomy over private autonomy.

¹² In an article published six years after Mouffe's article, Habermas' presents his vision of deliberative democracy as one that is distinct from liberal democracy: "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?"(Habermas, 2006).

of the friend/enemy grouping, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics and economics” (Schmitt, 1932/2008, p. 70). This suggests that both Mouffe and Schmitt believe that in the political realm, “we” and “they” identifications are more important in practice than what people think as individuals. In other words, what bounds individuals together is not so much intersubjective agreements (as for Habermas) but forms of identification.

Mouffe argues alongside Schmitt that whatever consensus deliberative democrats aim to is necessarily the result of an act of exclusion. For them, liberal rationalism requires a rejection of antagonism. This foreclosure of antagonism occurs at the inevitable moment of decision, in which deliberative democrats state that decisions are the result of consensus.

Mouffe (2011) reasserts the place of passions in politics by drawing on Freud to advance the role of libidinal investments in collective identifications and the emergence of antagonisms. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud suggested that societies are constantly threatened by forces of aggression that drive individuals. In order to deal with such disintegrating forces, civilization uses mechanisms such as fostering a communal sense of belonging through the drives for love. The establishment of a shared identity thus implies a libidinal investment, which allows for the formation of a “we.” However, this drive for love coexists with a drive for opposition which might become enmity: the “we” requires a “they” in order to exist. Mouffe clarifies that for Freud, both drives do not exist in isolation but are held together in varying proportions so as to become imperceptible to those affected by them. While the antagonistic drives cannot be entirely eliminated, their destructive force may be weakened. Mouffe suggests that democratic

institutions should participate in the “disarming” these antagonistic forces rather than ignoring them. As an example of how democratic institutions might take into account the unavoidable antagonisms, she uses Elias Canetti’s analysis of the parliamentary system. Canetti shows how this system uses the psychological structures and stages of a battle but ends the confrontation with a majority vote (Canetti, 1960/1984, p. 220). The way the confrontation takes place gives space for venting out antagonistic energies, but the solemnity of the process allows for a feeling of closure once the vote is concluded. The outvoted party does not necessarily believe the majority decision is wiser nor does it cease to believe in its own position but it simply accepts its defeat in a game that has been played according to the rules.

Emphasizing thus, that politics has the goal of creating an “us” versus a “them”, Mouffe explains that the challenge in pluralist democracies is to articulate a “them” that is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed but an “adversary”, that is, somebody whose ideas we seek to combat but whom we acknowledge as having the right to exist and defend those ideas. Here, it is important to note that the kind of collective identifications Mouffe refers to are not based on essentialized characteristics such as gender, race or ethnicity but the result of an articulation of common objectives and adversaries. The tension resulting from plurality can be negotiated by acknowledging that limits must be set to what can be seen as legitimate in the public sphere. However, the political nature of these limits must be recognized.

Mouffe’s approach to democracy provides a useful strategy within the game of electoral politics. Her and Laclau’s push for the left to build coalitions among different interest groups seems to correspond to the strategy used by a number of recent social and

political movements. In the United States the Occupy Wall Street movement is an example of a coalition that while focusing on increasing income disparities also attempted to federate a variety of groups. In the context of the early 2000s, when struggles against economic inequality were not at the forefront of the Democratic party's discourse, the "We are the 99th percent" slogan was undeniably inclusive, and aimed to give power to people through numbers in order to form an inclusive "we" and enter the democratic game in an agonistic manner. While initially the movement refused to engage with institutional politics, the influence of their expressions on mainstream discourse undoubtedly played a role in the unprecedented ascent of Bernie Sanders – whose forefront issue was to address increasing income disparities – as a candidate for the Democratic primary elections.

However, despite this federating power of discursive identity formations and the possibilities they open for the inclusion of marginalized groups into the political realm, Mouffe's model has two important weaknesses. The first is its top-down discursive approach which calls intellectual elites to come up with inclusive identities meant to allow for marginalized peoples to enter the political realm. Paradoxically, despite the intentions of inclusion that the articulation of identities carries, given the top-down character of discursive articulation, they inevitably distance the material realities and lived experiences of the people the people they purport to represent distancing thus these people from the political realm. The second weakness of the model is its risk of relativism: Mouffe calls for viewing those with whom we have conflicts as "adversaries" rather than as "enemies", but she does not fully articulate what she means by "adversary" (Wiley, 2002). It is difficult to avoid wondering who might or might not be accepted into

the category of “adversary.” For instance, should white supremacists be viewed as “adversaries” or are they “enemies”? Are they legitimate contenders in the political arena? Who defines who are “enemies” or “adversaries”? These questions become all the more pressing in the digital age in which previously marginalized groups who have not been able to adequately articulate why they feel they have been wronged are able to come together online and wrongly identify other marginalized groups (e.g. recent immigrants of color) as the culprits of their problems.

In summary to this first section, the political theories presented by Habermas and Mouffe suggest two very different approaches to a discourse-based theory of democracy. Through their discursive construction of the social they propose theories that challenge the static structures of Marxism. Habermas’ focus on language as a human activity to propose a form of rationality is an important development vis-à-vis the hegemony of instrumental reason in the modern era. However, while his intersubjective approach to norm validation is a compelling alternative to one based on individual consciousness, his model of communication is overly abstract, presupposes an entirely transparent view of language and – through the bracketing of identities– glosses over hierarchies of class, gender and race.

Mouffe’s view of democratic politics as an agonistic dynamic allows for the inclusion of questions of power differentials and attempts to address the dominance of discursive hegemonies. Her theory importantly includes the affective drives that characterize the human experience. However, her focus on discursively constituted agonism carries the risk of foreclosing possibilities for finding common grounds among different identity groups.

The digital age brings about a new dynamics in how we communicate and perceive ourselves and our surroundings. In the next section of this chapter, I refer to how media and communication scholars have used the philosophies of these two authors to analyze digitally mediated interactions.

Deliberation and A(nta)gonism in the Contemporary Media Landscape

Contemporary social life is increasingly intertwined with digital media (Couldry, 2016), therefore, we must take into account how this mediation affects political and social theory and practice (Gane, 2004). From the perspective of democracy as a realization that takes place through the discursive realm – as I argue Habermas and Mouffe see it – the digital entails an entire field of discursive dynamics. Given how the digital realm allows for plenty of space of disembodied interaction, their theories – because of their focus on symbolic exchanges – seem particularly apt as frameworks of analysis for such space. As a normative theory of democratic communication and action, the Habermasian model has been used as a framework to determine how much given forms of digitally mediated public discussion approximate to the ideal speech situation needed for deliberative democracy.

In recent years, communication scholars have begun to take interest in Mouffe's focus on drives, collective identifications and agonistic tendencies especially as the internet has become more multimodal and interactions taking place within it more vivid and personal. In this section, first I write about how internet scholars have used each of these authors' approaches to internet exchanges. I then present the limitations of these

approaches which I argue are linked with the material conditions that structure online exchanges.

The Internet as a Space for Deliberation

If in 1962 Habermas wrote that the barriers of access to television, radio and print media production, and the state and capitalist structures that controlled them had “eclipsed” the public sphere, several communication scholars of the early internet viewed it as a space in which the “the unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 2015, p. 306) could finally find its place in contemporary society. After decades of media monopolization by elites, the decentralized forms of communication that the internet allowed for was going to introduce an era of more inclusive and deliberative collective will-formation. One of the better known of these accounts was Howard Rheingold’s book *The Virtual Community* in which he described his utopian vision of an “electronic agora” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 298) in which regular citizens supported by increasingly cheap computers and decentralized networks would be able to express their opinions in a new space of conviviality “that could bring understanding into our lives” (Rheingold, 1993). Another enthusiast of the potential of the internet for deliberation in the 1990s was Mark Poster. In his essay “Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere” (Poster, 1997), he took up feminist critiques of the Habermasian public sphere that argued that the 19th century example of the ideal public sphere Habermas described systematically excluded women and the working class. Poster suggested then that the internet had the potential of offering a truly inclusive public as internet users’ identity was self-fashioned rather than imposed traits denoting race, gender, class or ethnicity.

For some decades now, these early accounts of the internet have been tempered by empirical research that has both noted the great potential of the internet to bringing together communities of practice as well as the obstacles inherent to it that impede a transition from a public space to a public sphere (see Papacharissi, 2008; Ward, 1997). Despite these limitations, the Habermasian ideal speech situation remains for many communication scholars a benchmark to evaluate the quality of exchanges needed for effective democratic deliberation.

The Internet as a Space for a “Vibrant Clash of Political Positions”

As the internet developed beyond a text-only medium into a multimodal platform facilitating immediate interactions between ever more connected users¹³ there has been increasing scholarly interest in the affective aspect of online communication and its potentialities for more inclusive forms of civic participation. Recent work on affect and online activism through the social media platform Twitter suggests that the kind of discursive identity formation and agonistic dynamics described by Mouffe are facilitated by the platform (Papacharissi, 2014).

Papacharissi (2008) suggests that online political expressions such as those seen on YouTube videos, blogs and discussions forums reflect Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism as a “vibrant clash of democratic political positions” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16). In later work, Papacharissi (2014) explains that digital media has a capacity to connect geographically distant people who have similar experiences and who in the past had not been able to come together to develop a common language or to make their experiences heard. In

¹³ With this I refer to the development of mobile technologies and the internet of things which enable – and also submit– users to be digitally connected at all times.

Mouffe's terms, these are the drives that bind people together through identification find a space online. This emphasis on drives is further explored in Papacharissi's more recent book *Affective Publics*, in which – seeking to theorize what she calls the “soft structures of [civic] engagement” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 115) – she refers to the social network site Twitter to explain that it is through the affective intensity that the platform facilitates that social movements emerge by connecting publics. Papacharissi views affect as something that captures “the intensity of drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction” (p. 21) and thus what allows these publics to connect discursively and network digitally. Through interactions on this platform publics that had been previously marginalized come to develop common languages, ways of formulating their grievances to larger publics, disrupting and “feeling their way” into politics (Papacharissi, 2014).¹⁴ Viewed like this, the way certain digital platforms facilitate the inclusion of previously excluded segments of the population suggests that Mouffe's approach to democracy may serve to address some of the weaknesses of the Habermasian model, namely the exclusionary character of the historical iterations of his idealized public sphere.

A contemporary example that illustrates well the necessary interplay between deliberative and agonistic dynamics online is the #MeToo movement. In 2006 civil rights activist Tarana Burke used the expression “Me Too” on the then popular social media platform Myspace as part of a campaign to promote “empowerment through empathy” among women of color who had experienced sexual abuse. Burke explained that she

¹⁴ It is important to note that when Papacharissi conducted her study, Twitter did not use algorithms to determine the presentation of contents on its timeline. Contents posted by a users' followers were presented to the user in chronological order, and marking systems of hashtags (marked by the symbol #), mentions (marked by the symbol @) and re-tweets functioned as modes of integration. However, since March 2016 Twitter uses an algorithm intended to increase user engagement.

came up with the phrase after being unable to respond to a 13-year-old girl who had confided in her that she had been sexually assaulted. In 2017, after *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine reported that dozens of women accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, abuse and rape, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano through a tweet, encouraged women to use the #MeToo phrase as a social media status in order to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.”¹⁵

As widely discussed in feminist scholarship, Habermas’ failure to account for the gendered and embodied subject limits the reach and applicability of his theory (Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1999; Fleming, 2010; Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1992). However, such limitations do not pertain to the core of his communicative rationality – which focuses on procedure – but to the historical instance of the public sphere he chose as an ideal. Might we not view his ideal speech situation – not as a space of equitable participation frozen in one iteration – but as a dynamic process in which the claims developed within multiple publics and counter publics¹⁶ are inscribed within wider conversations that eventually have enough clout to enter the political arena? In the example of the #MeToo movement, the validity claims made by those using the #MeToo hashtag have been historically excluded from conversations within influential circles. Of course, women have shared their stories among themselves or in personal circles for a long time, but conceiving such experiences as forms of harassment or abuse has required their articulation in larger publics and as legitimate sources of grievance. In Mouffe’s model, the discourse developed within the counter-public of the #MeToo movement would be an alternative discourse to that of patriarchy. The objective would be to develop such discourse so as to

¹⁵ Alyssa Milano. Twitter status October 2017.

¹⁶ See Fraser (1990) and Gitlin (2002).

enter the political arena in an antagonistic way against a “patriarchal discourse.” In her model, what would be sought would be to establish an agonistic relationship between the two discourses rather than an antagonistic one. However, wouldn’t posing agonism as an ends threatens Mouffe’s model with relativism and underestimates people’s ability to hear each other and to make the effort to understand others circumstances and reasons?

Rather than viewing the discourse developed through the #MeToo movement as irreconcilable with a dominant patriarchal discourse, it would be more productive to think about the degrees of access to publicity that allows for discourses to develop. Here a useful conceptualization is Miranda Fricker’s concept of *epistemic injustice*,¹⁷ which speaks of this denial of publicity as a form of publicity. Particularly relevant here case is the hermeneutical form of what she calls *epistemic injustice*. This hermeneutical injustice occurs when an oppressed group is unable to articulate or make sense of their own experiences to others and even to themselves because of a lack of access to spaces of exchange and publicity. Fricker gives the example of a woman who had been sexually harassed in the 1970’s before this critical concept had been developed and who is therefore unable to understand her own experience in such terms and much less to make it comprehensible to other people. This could happen because individuals suffering from such injustices might not have had ways of making their experiences public thus preventing them from developing a conceptual language about them. In the case of the harassment denounced within the #MeToo movement, without the movement these

¹⁷ Fricker suggests two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice is the result of prejudice against the credibility of someone’s word. For instance, when a given minority’s word is deemed as less credible simply because of their race, ethnicity or gender. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when an oppressed group is unable to articulate or make sense of their own experiences to others and even to themselves.

conversations have only existed under the shadow of a culture that normalizes the behavior denounced and often dismisses as gossip discussions of such topics. If in 2000 bell hooks wrote of the need to “create a mass based educational movement to teach everyone about feminism” (hooks, 2000), in 2018 the #MeToo hashtag seems to have federated a movement and inserted it into the public sphere. It remains to be seen whether it can be called “educational” or not.

Mouffe’s focus on collective drives and identifications remains relevant because – as Papacharissi suggests– it is the affective drives that permit such publics to come together and, from there, to weave individual stories into a larger narrative of oppression. These larger narratives are like the hegemonic articulations that Mouffe calls for. While the weaving together of these stories allows them to gather strength against dominant narratives, it is their articulation under the #MeToo signifier that facilitates their insertion into larger public forums and gives them the capacity to unsettle mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, Mouffe’s call for agonism as an end in democratic politics precludes from the outset the possibility of viewing the democratic process as one of collective learning.

Clearly both consensus-seeking and agonistic politics need to exist side by side in contemporary plural democracies. However, the fact that both theories remain in the discursive realm limits their potential to wholly reflect the material conditions of people’s lives: their sufferings, lived experiences, pleasures and pains. This drawback is intensified in the digital age as the means with which we communicate become more sophisticated while at the same time we notice less and less the structures that enable such symbolic interaction. For this, it is important to take into account how the material

conditions under which these forms of communication take structure the ways we perceive ourselves and each other.

With the increasing pervasiveness of online exchanges, it is surprising that Habermas has largely kept silent about the potentials of the internet in facilitating communicative action. Only in one brief intervention during the 2006 keynote speech to the International Communication Association, referring to blogs, he mentioned that these had little more than a reactive or “parasitical” role to play in the public sphere. He explained that despite “reactivating a grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers,” counterbalancing mass broadcasting media, and potentially undermining censorship in authoritarian regimes, the multiplicity of discussions that takes place over the internet results in the fragmentation of the public sphere into isolated issue publics in which the goal is not to arrive at an agreement concerning the public good, but more to bring about action motivated by private interests (Habermas, 2006). In reaction to this, Axel Bruns argued that Habermas’ claim of the Internet’s fragmentation was not accurate. To advance his claim, Bruns evoked how rating and tagging systems as well as implicit preference ranking systems had become the modes of integration of an increasingly large and varied forum. In Bruns’ words “The much feared ‘information overload’ predicted in the 90s simply hasn’t arrived – as networked information has grown, so have the tools available for making sense of it” (Bruns, 2007, par. 10 in Geiger, 2009). Unfortunately, this is a clear misunderstanding of Habermas. When Bruns suggests that rating and tagging tools accomplish the task of classification and aggregation needed to prevent fragmentation he ignores that what Habermas seeks to recreate with his theory of communicative action is precisely the integrative function that

language has within the lifeworld. For Habermas, language as a human practice is the means by which people seek to come to agreements in order to collectively engage in action. Systems of aggregation and classification artificially gather people according to predetermined criteria that carry the values and – to some extent – the intentions of those who put the system in place. In fact, the way systems of aggregation have evolved is one of the major subjects of controversy in the latest research. In 2009 Stuart Geiger warned against assumptions that these systems are “decentralized, democratic, meritocratic, bottom-up, radically participatory and so on” (Geiger, 2009, p. 22). Also making a Habermasian analysis, in his critique of the systems of algorithmic aggregation he argues that – while at a micro-level the kind of Habermasian ideal speech community might be coming together– at a macro-level interaction are not constructed through human communication but by algorithms. In such dynamics it is not the Habermasian principle of “the unforced force of the better argument” that gathers people of different backgrounds to come together to decide on collective matters, but rather the power of algorithms and aggregative systems” (Geiger, 2009, p. 25). The challenge of the digital age is more linked to the imperceptibility and “naturalness” of the powers that structure social media interactions. As Couldry expressed (mentioned in Chapter II), media producing institutions have become indistinguishable from interpersonal communications. This kind of control through code and protocol has been theorized as invisible, powerful and difficult to contest (Galloway, 2004; Lessig, 1999). Technology philosopher Andrew Feenberg, also using Habermasian terms, proposes that technology is a steering medium that “delinguistifies” and perhaps colonizes the lifeworld (Feenberg, 1996). At a close level of analysis, Heyman and Pierson (2015) apply Feenberg’s

reinterpretation of Habermas to analyze three Facebook algorithms that serve as passage points that guide and push connections between users and advertisers. They conclude that the evolving business model of the social network site from a site initially developed to facilitate communication between users to a public company subject to requirements of profitability has resulted in an increased delinguistification and colonization of the lifeworld of users. As Facebook algorithms are black boxed¹⁸ and are constantly changing, users have no way of knowing why they are presented with certain contents and not others (Heyman & Pierson, 2015). Indeed, the way these algorithms are structured precludes an intuitive understanding of how they work.¹⁹

In this environment in which the social and the technical are closely imbricated, what might seem like an ideal Habermasian speech situation in which interlocutors from different walks in life come together to present their arguments, is partly the result of algorithms that are imperceptible to those involved in the act of communication.

Algorithms efficiently bring together people of similar interests and backgrounds not because the designers of the platforms disinterestedly want marginalized people to support one another and form coalitions – as Mouffe would want it – but because identification and belonging is a basic human drive. Media corporations have figured out

¹⁸ The term “black box” is used in computer science and engineering to refer to a device, system or object which can be viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs, without any knowledge of its internal workings. In the field of science and technology studies Bruno Latour uses the term “black boxing” as “the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.” (Latour, 1999)

¹⁹ Remarks by Joaquin Candela, head of applied machine learning at Facebook, illustrate this well. In a 2017 interview Candela explained that the system that powers Facebook’s main algorithm is composed of different artificial intelligence pieces that perform “domain specific tasks” such as speech recognition, translation and image analysis. In his words the system is “a very modular layered cake where you can plug in at any level you want” (Candela, 2017). He noted that most of the engineers who work on the algorithm do not entirely understand how it works as a whole.

how to profit from these drives. At the current juncture (2016-2018) the architecture of persuasion at the basis of Facebook's business model relies on gathering massive amounts of personal data and with that information presenting contents that users are likely to agree or engage with. This is because the longer the user is on the platform, the more time the platform has to expose the user to advertisements.

In terms of the user's exposure to other kinds of contents, these are limited to what the algorithm determines to be the users' preferences. The way users perceive the world as portrayed through the platform is increasingly limited by these algorithms (Tufekci, 2017), and therefore their exposure to alternative viewpoints and experiences is diminished. In an environment in which people are constantly encouraged to associate with those they identify with, the intensifications of exposure to those who are like-minded gives them the impression that those who think otherwise are necessarily adversaries. This operates a closure on what the point of view of the others might be: we start to assume that there is no possibility of ambiguity or change in the stance of the other. It also becomes increasingly difficult to maintain an independent position when we feel it differs from that of our group. The claims of more influential members of the group gather more visibility, obscuring or excluding viewpoints and experiences of less powerful members. Since these associations are not the result of disinterested social interaction unmediated by the interests of capital and power, it is necessary to think beyond discursive theories of democracy to think about how capital and power strengthen certain kinds of discourse.

Conclusion

All in all, Mouffe's and Habermas' thought can be framed as theories of how people associate to form collectives geared towards action. Habermas' theory foregrounds the conditions that allow such action to be perceived as legitimate to all of those involved in it, while Mouffe is more interested in the affective drives that bind people together and how these can be federated in order to enter the political realm. While both the deliberative and the agonistic models provide important insights about how people may relate and try to work together to effect change within a democracy, it is clear that they are not mutually exclusive as each one of their proponents suggest. A weakness of both approaches is that, although both authors attempt to ground their theories on practices inherent to the lifeworld, their theories end up extricating individuals from their material realities and everyday practices. Because of the prominence of the symbolic in the digital age, this extrication presupposes unprecedented challenges that need to be examined. In the next chapter, I elaborate on the limitations of these two approaches and propose using Spinoza's thought as a materialist lens that underpin Etienne Balibar's conception of speech which takes into account the material conditions that help determine how speech is shaped.

Chapter IV

TOWARDS FREEDOM OF SPEECH AS A PUBLIC GOOD

As concluded in Chapter III, Habermas' and Mouffe's theories of democracy may be stated in terms of how people get together to achieve political action. In contrast to aggregative forms of democracy, these two models of democracy attempt to place the social epistemology at the forefront of the democratic project. While both models retain the goal of emancipation, their attempts to surpass class overdetermination led them to formulate models that are too abstracted from actual conditions of structural domination. Despite their distinct genealogies, both modes of collective democratic action are based on a view of discourse that only takes place within political institutions and is fixed in one point in time: Habermas in the ideal speech situation, and Mouffe in the agonistic encounter. For Habermas, people act together by bringing forth validity claims, collectively appraising them and – based on these appraisals – agreeing on how to act as a group. His model relies on the integration of an ideal speech situation into democratic institutions. This ideal speech situation is punctual and abstracted from the lifeworld. For Mouffe, entrance into the political realm is the result of establishing “chains of equivalence” between different political struggles. People come together and are able to act as a group *once* they have articulated a chain of equivalence in the form of an *us* that

is opposed to a *them* within the political arena. In this chapter I argue that although Habermas and Mouffe's approaches are successful in showing us how communication shapes collective action, their theories of democracy – because they only focus on incorporating these types of communication within institutions as they are – are static and therefore not sufficiently grounded in the evolving materiality of the environment in which people's lived experience takes place. I advance that as an alternative we should take heed to Etienne Balibar's call to view of *the process* of freedom of speech as a public good, an idea that draws its theoretical underpinnings from Baruch Spinoza's transindividual ontology.

To do this, in the first part of this chapter, I argue that limiting social epistemologies to a given discursive moment hampers them from fully accounting for the lived experiences of people as well as the structural conditions that allow certain discourses to be heard and others to remain subaltern. To locate my discussion in this age of pervasive use of social media, I continue to use the #MeToo movement as an example to illustrate the limitations of Habermas' and Mouffe's discursive approaches in the digital age. Then, to prepare the conceptual ground for my use of Balibar's idea of freedom of speech as a public good, I start the second part of the chapter with an introduction to Spinoza's ontology. I then move on to presenting how the rapidly evolving conditions of the digital age call for a revised conception of freedom of speech. I end the chapter by presenting Balibar's argument for decentering the concept of freedom speech from the individual subject in order to propose a dialogic transindividual process which is, *de facto*, constitutive of democracy.

Looking Beyond an Abstracted and Punctual Moment of Encounter

In the digital era, as our knowledge about the social is increasingly nourished by mediated representations, it is imperative to be mindful of the limits of viewing discourse as isolated from material context in which it is experienced and produced. As discussed in Chapter III, in the context of the struggle for women's rights, even if women have been voicing their experiences of oppression for decades – if not centuries– in the last few years the connective affordances of digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been instrumental for making individual stories public thereby energizing a narrative of oppression and allowing it to enter the political arena¹. However, an analysis of the work of these groups through the lenses proposed by Habermas and Mouffe respectively – while revealing the procedures by which claims come to be considered as admissible (Habermas) and the discursive formation of a common identity (Mouffe)– is not able to account for the forces that allow certain people to have access to publicity and certain claims to be relayed and thrive on public forums, nor the limitations of discourse in reflecting people's lived experiences.

In the case of the #MeToo movement, in Habermasian terms, when the numerous allegations of Harvey Weinstein's abuses came out on a report by the *New York Times*, the need to prosecute Weinstein became clear to the public. While Habermas' theory of communicative action shows us how through discourse we can collectively agree on what might be the right course of action, it cannot account for things such as how the claims raised may come out to the public, the conditions under which such claims may be

¹ By 'entering the political arena' I mean, the claims of these movements are relayed by mainstream/legacy media outlets and potentially resulting in action through institutional means (e.g. legislation).

viewed as true or whose claims are more likely to be believed. In the Weinstein example, the Habermasian model is only useful after the claims have been aired in public. It is blind to the fact that these claims only came to public attention after they were published on a report written by a particularly visible reporter (Ronan Farrow,² the exceptionally gifted son of Hollywood celebrities) on two particularly influential publications that had the means to conduct meticulous reporting (*The New Yorker Magazine* and *The New York Times*), and that those involved in the case belong to one of the most visible segments of the American population (Hollywood stars and producers). The Habermasian model cannot account for the historical normalization of women's speech as less important and trustworthy than men's. Furthermore, it cannot account for the difficulties encountered by individuals when they have not had the space to articulate their experiences as instances of oppression.

Conversely, Mouffe's focus on articulating identities – which in this example is clear if we think of how the #MeToo hashtag has become an identity marker– permits a large mass of individuals affected by sexual harassment and violence to share their individual stories to a wider audience and to articulate them into a narrative of systemic oppression that can then be expressed in institutional settings. Mouffe's model allows for taking into account the irregularities of the terrain that Habermasian model fails to consider. For her, what is important is that people with similar claims and experiences join together under a discursive identity (in this case the #MeToo marker) in order to enter the political arena in an agonistic manner. Democracy becomes a reality once collective forms of identity are “made available by discourses that construct specific

² The report in the *New Yorker* was conducted by Farrow, and the one in the *New York Times* by Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor.

‘subject positions’ that allow individuals to acquire a democratic political identity” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 68). She advances that “the central category in democratic politics is the category of the “adversary”, the opponent with whom we have in common a shared allegiance to democratic principles but with whom there is disagreement about their interpretation” (p. 68). Mouffe’s emphasis on collective identifications underplays the importance of the claims of oppression, and of the different levels of gravity of experiences. For example, the #MeToo movement gathers in the same group victims of rape, abuse, harassment as well as those in more ambiguous situations. This is problematic as, if politics is mostly just about adversarial relations, then little room is left for a recognition of mutual humanity. That said, the admission of conflict in the political realm is particularly useful in contemporary plural societies. However, given that Mouffe only focuses on the “political moment”, the dichotomy between agreement and disagreement upon which her model relies forecloses other forms of democratic relationality. In this way, Mouffe’s model is static as it allows no room for collective learning, witnessing, mutual accountability or efforts to build common grounds.

By reducing subjects to their discursive conception at a given point in time, both Habermas and Mouffe grant them levels of autonomy that do not exist in reality. Despite Habermas’ efforts to develop an epistemology that transcends the “solitary thinker” to one of intersubjectivity, his conception of the subject retains the self-sufficiency and autonomy of atomistic individualism. Subjects who engage in his “ideal speech situation” are free to speak how they wish, exist in a world devoid of discursive hegemonies and have the communicative competence to express their claims and to articulate clearly their experiences. They also have access to mainstream public forums as well as the freedom

to move and assemble with others. Mouffe's subjects also have a considerable amount of autonomy as they have the freedom to articulate their identity in whichever way necessary, they have sufficient understanding of the political realm to know what kind of identities of oppression work at a given time and they have access to mainstream public forums. All in all, both Habermas and Mouffe's conceptions of democracy are centered on a subject already *possessing* rights. We will see how this is problematic in the third part of this chapter.

Despite their reliance on what I view as atomistic conceptions of the individual, both Habermas and Mouffe are concerned with how collective action takes shape, and how this action may enter institutionalized forms of government. There is, thus, at both of their cores, a dynamic that is driven by a desire that is inscribed in the collective, a thrust that attempts to give movement to systems that want to remain static. In the Habermasian lifeworld people act together because they either do not have a choice or because they feel something will come out of their collective action. Their action is always in one way or another inscribed in a situation of necessity or desire. If the motivation of Mouffe's subjects seems to be extrinsic (e.g. defining an *us* versus a *them*), at the core of her anthropology is a drive to associate with others that we think are similar to us. However, both theorists, by abstracting these drives from the environment that animates them, extricate to a certain extent the driving component of collective action in their models of democracy. Thus, when Habermas transplants the spontaneous interactions that happen in the lifeworld into a formalized theory of communicative rationality, he uproots the motivation for such interactions from their situated context. When Mouffe formalizes a

poststructuralist schema of opposing discourses, she fossilizes collective drives into antagonistic identities.

To attempt an approach that integrates the movement presupposed by drive or desire, that is also more sensitive to context, and that still retains the interest of consensus while being conscious of the inextricability of conflict, I advance that we must go beyond an exclusively discursive and atomistic conception of the subject of democracy to one that takes into account her environment and embodied – including collectively embodied – being. To do this, I borrow from the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza who through his monism proposes a conception of the individual that Etienne Balibar qualifies as “transindividual”, which is essentially a drive for self-preservation that exists in an environment of constant transformation and exchange. Then, with the hopes of developing a philosophy of education that is adapted to the digital age, I go on to propose that we adopt Balibar’s notion that freedom of speech as a process is a public good.

Spinoza’s Ontology: We Cannot Escape the Myriad Relations That Are Constantly Affecting Us

A Short Introduction to Spinoza’s Metaphysics³

For Spinoza, there is only one *substance*, and all natural beings are modes within that unbounded totality of substance. If Descartes and Aristotle considered things like trees, birds and people to be substances, for Spinoza, everything is one unique substance:

³ Spinoza’s most important work, the *Ethics* – written as a set of propositions in ‘geometrical’ form – sets out to propose a monistic philosophy that later forms the basis of his political ideas expressed in his *Political Treatise*. In this chapter I draw from the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise* as well as from readings of these works. For an explanation of the structure of the *Ethics* and a citation guide please refer to the Appendix.

“God” or “nature.” Other things are modes or properties of that substance. Even though substance has an infinite number of attributes, Spinoza claims that humans can only perceive two of them: extension and thought.⁴ Infinite and finite modes, which are properties that need a substance to exist as they cannot exist by themselves, are conceived either through the attribute of thought or that of extension. For instance, the infinite mode of thought is the infinite intellect, whereas the infinite mode of extension are motion and rest. Their corresponding finite modes are “a mind” and “a body.” Even though we conceive of the two modes of thought and extension as separate, for Spinoza they aren’t but expressions of the same substance.

Individuality as Transindividuality

Spinoza’s concept of the individual is central to his philosophy and to my argument. Contrary to Habermas for whom the definition of the individual is secondary to the procedures of communication, and to Mouffe for whom the individual is posited as the result of a discursive articulation, Spinoza’s conception of the human individuation is thoroughly discussed throughout his oeuvre. His view of the individual as a force who is inextricably intertwined with her environment is important to my argument as it highlights an ineluctable interdependence in which actions cannot be conceived of as fully resulting from individual will.

The point of departure for Spinoza’s definition of the individual is his unconventional concept of God. By stating that there is only one substance of which

⁴ This can be seen in: E2a4: “We feel a certain body to be affected in many ways,” E2a5: “We do not feel or perceive any individual things except bodies and modes of thinking,” and E2p13: “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body– i.e. a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else.”

everything is an expression, Spinoza rejects the idea of an external and transcendent God. He locates everything within the same ecology of causality rather than separating a transcendent realm of ideas from a finite realm of bodies. Along with his rejection of the idea that the mind dominates the body, for him, human beings are not exceptional beings in relation to nature, but beings that are also subject to the causal forces of their animate and inanimate environment just as any other being.

In contrast to classical liberal approaches that posit the individual as a clearly bounded and discrete unit, for Spinoza we are necessarily unfinished, interdependent beings, immersed within an expanse of “affects.” Whereas the liberal conception of the individual is one of autonomous beings whose free will renders them masters of actions and words, for Spinoza individuals are highly determined by their environment and their freedom is more a function of understanding than one of will.⁵

Spinoza’s conception of the individual may be best understood through Etienne Balibar’s (1997) reconstruction of what Spinoza conceives to be the *essence of Man*. Through a close reading of Spinoza’s work, Balibar suggests that Spinoza can be considered a “theoretician of *transindividuality*” (Balibar, 1997, p. 11). Drawing from Gilbert Simondon’s (1964) concept, Balibar uses the term *transindividuality* to refer to the reciprocal construction of the psychic and the collective⁶. He explains that rather than viewing human essence as a category, Spinoza defines it as the singularity of each person’s desire for self-preservation.⁷ This drive – which Spinoza calls the *conatus*– also

⁵ We will later see how Spinoza’s conception of knowledge is central to his theory of sociality.

⁶ In contrast with Plato’s conception of the individual as an ideal form, and with Aristotle’s conception of an individual inner perfection, for Simondon, individuality is a process of transindividuation rather than something that is already fully constituted.

⁷ This can be gleaned from these two propositions in the Ethics:

“When this conatus (...) is related to mind and body together, it is called Appetite, which is therefore nothing less but man’s essence” (Spinoza, E3p9s).

designates the power (*puissance*⁸) of singular beings to affect and be affected. In this conception, individuals are not self-contained entities but porous singularities that are constantly being affected and affecting what surrounds them. This is happening in a never-ending process of production of individuals that are all causally interdependent but that all have a distinct drive for self-preservation.

Instead of stable entities, each one of us is composed of multiple parts that exist within a flexible environment of exchanges. There is only a set of relations that remain constant within each individual. Hasana Sharp (2005) explains this by referring to how – in order to breathe– we are constantly exchanging parts of our bodily constitution with the atmosphere. Since we are not fully constituted or “finished” beings, we are always active, in an activity that always presupposes a previous connection with other human and non-human individuals. We become unique because others also become separated and singular in their own way.⁹

Political implications of transindividuality

Transindividuality, thus, rather than supposing that the diverging interests of individuals necessarily puts them in confrontation with one another, entails a

“Now desire is the very nature of every single individual (...). Therefore, the desire of each individual differs from the desire of another to the extent that the nature or essence of the one differs from the essence of the other” (Spinoza, E3p57d).

⁸ If in many European languages the Latin expressions of *potestas* and *potentia* have respective translations (such as *poder* and *potencia* in Spanish, and *pouvoir* and *puissance* in French) in English both meanings are contained in the word *power*. This differentiation is crucial in Spinoza’s philosophy so, just as Michael Hardt does in his translation of Antonio Negri’s *The Savage Anomaly*, I indicate the difference through capitalization (*Power* for *potestas* and *power* for *potentia*) and by adding the French word in parentheses. I use French because most of the secondary literature I use is written in French. While *potestas* indicates sovereignty or authority over something else, *potentia* points to a capacity to compose oneself in harmony with the whole world (Deleuze, 1998). Deleuze further explains that for Spinoza *Power* (*pouvoir*) is always an obstacle to the effectuation of powers (*puissances*).

⁹ “Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being” (E3p6).

philanthropic¹⁰ form of sociality. Since no individual has enough power for self-preservation by herself, it is in her interest to coalesce with others against whatever is adverse.¹¹

The conatus is a compositional force, a singularity that depends on a constant and active exchange with the myriad of beings surrounding it. Balibar (1997) explains that the composition of the conatus relies on relations of resulting from knowledge that comes from the imagination and from reason. Imagination and reason – the two types of knowledge that Spinoza presents in his Ethics – can also be understood as ways of composing or constituting our collective and individual selves.¹² How we relate to others is a function of how we know them. In this way, for Balibar, Spinoza’s theory of knowledge is a theory of communication (Balibar, 1998). Per this theory of communication, since we are finite beings, we necessarily constitute ourselves and our environment through reason and imagination.

Spinoza calls the imagination “the first kind of knowledge”. It involves how our bodies are affected by whatever they encounter. This kind of knowledge is “inadequate” and confused. It tells us more about our own bodies’ capacity to be affected than about whatever is affecting it. Spinoza gives the example of the sun that is perceived by the body as “a flat disc located at a distance of about three hundred feet.” This kind of

¹⁰ I use the term *philanthropic* here, not in the sense of ‘benevolent donations to the less well off’, but in a sense that has love at its core and thus presupposes the awareness of the need for economic and social structures that ensure the welfare of all.

¹¹ Spinoza – like Hobbes – defines ‘men’ by their power (*puissance*), however, unlike for Hobbes who conceives of the individual as having unlimited rights in the state of nature and giving up some of those rights as he enters ‘civil society’, for Spinoza right and power are equivalent. This means that as an individual associates with others his powers are augmented and therefore also his rights.

¹² In the Ethics, Spinoza lists three types of knowledge: the first one is derived from the imagination, the second one is provided through reason and the third – and controversial one, often put aside by scholars – exceeds reason and is reached through ‘intuition’.

“confused” knowledge results in different ways of relating: as I am constantly being affected by everything I encounter, I try to avoid all that I think will put my own composition in peril and, in reverse, I associate with what I perceive to be compatible with my own composition. Compositions that are made by means of the imagination work through identification. As human beings we imitate others and strive for others to imitate us. Like reason, imagination provides a form of association that “is similarly conditioned by the struggle to persevere in being” (Balibar, 1998, p.85). However, imaginative knowledge is like “conclusions without premises” and therefore passive.

When we relate through reason, we are active as relationships of synergy or “*convenientia*” increase our potential for self-preservation:

Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that all together they should aim at the common advantage of all. (Spinoza, E4 P18S)

While conveying that it is best to “compose” ourselves through reason, he tells us that the passive composition that happens through imaginative encounters is also necessary and inevitable.

Just as he rejects body-mind dualism, Spinoza views emotions as having as important a role as reason for self-preservation. This is because it is through emotions that we can guide “inadequate” ideas towards more “adequate” ones. For Spinoza, the transition from one composition to another through imaginative encounters entails the emergence of passions (affects) – mainly feelings of sadness or of joy. Joyful passions emerge when we encounter bodies that we imagine as potentially making us stronger. It is through joyful passions that we can progress from inadequate relations to adequate

ones. On the other hand, sadness arises from random encounters with external bodies with which we are unable to perceive any possibility of synergy. Nevertheless, despite the inadequacy of these encounters, in our desire for self-preservation we seek relations and associations. It is when we think ourselves to be in a situation of chaos, and struggle to form joyful relations that the image of a god-like figure can gain strength. By eliciting and encouraging “sad passions” of fear, tyrants strive to render the masses passive. Rather than uniting the plurality of *puissances* into a stronger formation through adequate relations, the strongman seeks his own *power* by encouraging “inadequate” relations among the people and projecting an image of personal freedom.

In every social formation, compositions through reason and imagination necessarily take place in varying proportions thus allowing for a gradation between these different forms of relating. In this way, Spinoza – contrary to Habermas and Mouffe – allows us to conceive democracy as not only consisting of either reason or passion but as necessitating both. In contrast with Habermas for whom arriving at agreement or consensus through deliberation is always possible and desirable, for Spinoza both agreement and disagreement are constitutive of the political community. In this way, Spinoza’s thought partially converges with Mouffe’s since, for her, conflict or disagreement is the defining feature of modern politics. However, for Mouffe, conflicts occur upon contact between the boundaries of discourse¹³ whereas for Spinoza conflict in rational agreement arises from difference in experience and feeling (Lord, 2017).

Whereas Mouffe attempts to position those with different experiences in the political

¹³ For Mouffe, the constitution of an identity – either individual or collective – is always a political act that presupposes the discursive production of an adversarial relationship to ‘the other’. What shapes democratic politics is these points of antagonism.

realm through discursive articulation, a Spinozian approach foregrounds the context in which these different experiences and feelings emerge. In Spinoza's relational ontology the ratios of reason and imagination are continuously changing, affects are constantly circulating, allowing thus for a variety of ways of relating to each other that go beyond the friend-enemy dichotomy.

The Digital: Destructuring and Restructuring of Compositions.

In the Spinozian worldview the realm of representation does not escape the infinite relations of causality. Every mediation implies interaction between physical objects and ideas and generates new modes and intensities of circulating affects. New ideas need to be incorporated into existing structures of reason and imagination. With each shift in communication technologies – be it the transition from clay tablets to papyrus scrolls or the emergence of cable television and digital technologies – modes of knowing and relating shift, prompting us to organize them into new configurations and to integrate them into sedimented habits of knowing and relating.

Technology – while presupposing change – does not guarantee greater emancipation in equal degrees for everybody. Power is embedded within technological innovations and shifts, amplifying pre-existing bias, improving the lives of some while at the same time oppressing others. For instance, algorithms undoubtedly carry the biases and values of those involved in their design and, in the case of algorithms that use artificial intelligence, the bias of the data pool they draw on. An example of this is when the male team of programmers of Apple's health tracking application failed to include

menstruation – historically perhaps the most tracked physiological aspect of humanity.¹⁴ These kinds of exclusions translate themselves into real-life situations favoring those whose knowledge was taken into account for the design of things ranging from everyday objects to life-saving artifacts¹⁵ and public health programs, thus perpetuating, intensifying or reshifting imbalances of power. There is of course, much to be said about the business model of social media and tracking devices that capture their user’s “power” in the form of big data.¹⁶ All in all, in Spinozian terms, rather than effortlessly progressing towards compositions that make us stronger, we must constantly strive to figure out how emergent realities reconfigure patterns of oppression and come up with new ways to address them.

Within the plasticity of the digital, novel compositions of individual and collective selves emerge at unprecedented speed. We struggle to find their place in long-formed habits, institutions and socio-political structures. The digital allows us to see what was previously inaccessible to us due to factors such as geographical distance (e.g. becoming aware of the Great Pacific garbage patch through an internet meme) or conventions of what is to be kept in private or intimate spheres (e.g. experiences of domestic and sexual abuse or the experience of drug addiction).¹⁷ We also have at our disposal a variety of modes (image, sound, video, etc.) that allow us to affect and be affected by a larger – or perhaps just different– variety of bodies and ideas than before

¹⁴See <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/12/how-self-tracking-apps-exclude-women/383673/>

¹⁵ A more evident example of inequalities resulting from design is given in the article in the Atlantic (in previous footnote): the newest artificial hearts are designed to fit 80% of men but only 20% of women.

¹⁶ It is precisely by providing the intensity of feeling that one is expressing oneself freely on social media platforms that these platforms appropriate, accumulate, surveil and commercialize user’s data. The irony is greater when one sees the ‘speech authority’ and visibility that the owners of these companies enjoy.

¹⁷ See for instance: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/30/faces-of-an-epidemic>

the digital. On the converse, novel ways of directing our affects emerge with new technologies. Legal, technological and financial factors contribute to determine the speed of connections and the accessibility and prominence of contents.¹⁸ All these changes represent challenges for the integration of new compositions into the constitution of our individual and collective bodies.

The multimodal character of the digital also marks a shift in how we communicate with others: while spoken and written language are characterized by the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified (Saussure, 1916/2011), image and video make meaning through a different logic. As the digital allows us to establish connections across geographies we develop relationships both through the imagination and through reason with distant others. Here I think the example of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States illustrates well how collective and individual selves are constituted through structures of affect and reason, and how the nature of the digital allows for unprecedented configurations. In 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of black 17-year old Trayvon Martin, black community organizer Alicia Garza wrote a Facebook post in which said: “Our Lives Matter: Black Lives Matter” to which artist and activist Patrisse Cullors responded with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags – which are used as tags on social media to make messages searchable– allow users to easily find the messages related to the theme of the hashtag. Through the functionalities of social media, the idea of Black Lives Matter (BLM) became the name of an international activist movement that campaigns against violence and racism towards black people. In her most recent work about affect in social media,

¹⁸ Net neutrality. Algorithmic manipulation.

Zizi Papacharissi (2014) explains that it is through the affective intensity of digitally enabled social movements that publics connect and develop common languages, disrupting and “feeling their way” into politics. The case of BLM illustrates how digital media made possible the emergence of a movement. In Spinozist terms, both through “adequate causes” (e.g. for black people who have directly experienced systemic racism, the idea that black lives are de facto not valued as human lives is something they can explain “by their own nature”), and “inadequate causes” (e.g. memes that circulate with inaccurate information about statistics but that because of their high emotive impact succeed in fostering identification) the collective “body” of the movement took shape. The collective body which constitutes itself through the common experiences of racism and violence, also attempts to find its place within the larger ecologies of the country and the world. This formation occurs both through logics of the imagination and of reason. When we take the example of the Black Lives Matters movement, the insufficient character of a politics that remains in the discursive realm such as that proposed by Mouffe becomes clear. The idea of a “Black Lives Matters” as a purely discursive identity, within the logics of neoliberal capitalism in which identities are commodified and subject to market logics, robs the movement of its constitutive substance. The forces, that is, experiences of segregation, mass incarceration, poverty, targeting that take place in the day-to-day struggles of black people and that provide substance to the revindications of the movement, are not adequately expressed in purely discursive politics. This suggests that there is no possibility of reaching common ground due to a multiplicity of hegemonic discourses and denies the commonality of a shared material world.

The relation between the sphere of political action and that of everyday experience is what is at stake here. If modernity has been characterized by the mediation of institutions between the individual and the state, it is not only the composition of such institutions that is shaken by the intensified circulations of the digital, but also their very role as intermediaries. As the interactive, person-to-person and person-to-many features of the internet allow, presidents might tweet directly to the citizens of their country – often more demagogically than otherwise – or citizens may express themselves online and ultimately organize themselves to form a political force, all bypassing traditional institutions. We are able to do these things not only because there is an infrastructure that allows us to do it, but because in democracies we are guaranteed certain rights, particularly the right to express ourselves freely. It is how we conceive these rights and freedoms that I would like to problematize in the last section of this chapter.

The Responsive Process of Freedom of Speech as Public Good

Freedom of speech is at the core of democracy. Hasana Sharp (2011) suggests that freedom of speech is conventionally viewed as a form of freedom of the will. Spinoza views speech as a way of *revealing* the affects to which we are collectively subject. Sharp expresses: “Our words, like the images that populate our minds, even if they don’t point to nature as it is in itself, reveal ourselves to ourselves, disclose our passionate character and that of our milieu” (Sharp, 2011, p. 52). For Spinoza, freedom of speech is desirable in a civil society not because it constitutes an expression of freedom but because, by allowing us to know the passions that circulate in our collective, it allows us parse out more appropriate compositions and synergies. Through speech we can collectively figure

out which passions make us stronger and which weaker. In this section I argue that in order to really heed the epistemic aspect of democracy, we must start viewing speech not so much as an expression of our individual will, but more as means to organize, rearrange and reassemble ourselves by making explicit the affects that circulate among us. For this, I borrow from Balibar's writings on what he calls "freedom of expression."¹⁹

Assumptions about speech as an expression of the individual shape the legal framework of freedom of speech. Balibar (2018b) explains that in the liberal tradition of the American Constitution, freedom of speech is conceptualized as a subjective form of freedom modeled after rights to private property. It is thus a kind of freedom that is attached to a person as an inalienable right. In a way, opinions are thought of as being owned by those who express them, and their limitation carries consequences only for their possessors. As this conception of opinions underpins speech legislation in liberal societies, freedom of speech laws frame attacks against this liberty as violations to the sovereignty of the individual. Legislation acts to protect the limitations to the sovereignty of the individual

This conception of freedom of expression as an individual personal right, Balibar argues, robs it from its generative capacity to regroup and constitute collective forces. In Spinozan terms, it is through speech that we are able to come together, to figure out the passions and images that circulate among and within us – both at an individual and at a collective level– and to come up with better and stronger configurations. When we view speech as a mere externalization of the thoughts and feelings of individuals, we overlook speech's constitutive capacity.

¹⁹ By 'expression' Balibar extends the notion of free speech to the wide array of human expressions including artistic expressions, discourses, messages, reports and spectacles.

Balibar goes further to give speech a function that is constituent of democracy. He does this by advancing that freedom of expression is actually “the right to have rights” in Hannah Arendt’s sense.²⁰ Here again, comes into play the dubiety of the verb “to have” as seen in Lida Maxwell’s analysis of Arendt’s phrase. Maxwell (2018) tells us that we must understand “to have rights” not as a matter of ownership but in the way “we might “have” a meeting, or a dinner party, or a conference, or a convention. Here, “to have” rights means to participate in staging, creating, and sustaining (through protest, legislation, collective action, or institution building) a common political world where the ability to legitimately claim and demand rights becomes a possibility for everyone” (Maxwell, 2018). It is also by viewing rights as the possibility to participate in a shared world, that Balibar advances the alternative for thinking of freedom of speech not as a personal freedom but as a *transindividual dialogic process*.

Through this logic of thinking of speech as building a common political world, Balibar puts forward the idea that *the process* of freedom of speech is *in itself* a public good. He then further unravels the concept of *transindividual dialog* by focusing on the interpersonal nature of meaning as put forward by linguistic pragmatics. Thus, rather than merely being statements of facts, which can be assessed as being true or false, speech implies reciprocity and anticipated responses to “speech acts” (Austin, 1973). Meaning emerges through the interaction of voices. The world is constructed collectively. Now, it is precisely the collective nature of the constitution of freedom of speech that requires the

²⁰ Arendt used the expression in at least two publications: a 1949 article and in her 1951 book “The Origins of Totalitarianism.” She lived as a stateless refugee for 18 years after fleeing Nazi Germany until she became naturalized as an American. Despite her initial optimism, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, she grew increasingly skeptical about the possibility of enforcement of such rights by states.

active participation of its constituents. If speech is to be free, then the discursive sphere cannot be dominated by only a few voices. When this happens, speech is limited and its possibilities are stunted. This is why freedom of speech as a public good presupposes the combination of the equal liberties of its participants.²¹ As such, this dialogical dynamic requires active construction and conservation but it is also continuously vulnerable to colonization and destruction.

Balibar explains that this is how the process of free speech is a public good not only in the ancient sense of how the *polis* is the common achievement of its own citizens, but also in the sense given by recent definitions – mostly developed by economists²² in the context of the information and knowledge “revolutions” brought on by digital technologies— by which *public good* refers to things that are of collective use by nature as well indivisible. For instance, knowledge is a public good in the sense that when someone comes to know something, they are not taking anything away from the knowledge “pool.” Rather, the interaction by which knowledge takes place opens up more possibilities for it to grow.

As speech is the way in which the collective *knows* itself, the more diverse the perspectives, the more accurate the image of itself society has. This is why Balibar turns around John Rawls’ concept of the *veil of ignorance* to refer to how elites are ignorant of

²¹ Balibar’s term “equaliberty” is an attempt to address the contradiction between the concepts of equality and liberty that are presented as bedrocks of modern democratic citizenship. While equality is presented in economic terms, and liberty in juridical terms, Balibar argues that equality and liberty must be equated as modern rights. However, this equation implies acknowledging the fragility of institutions as it depends on a differential between insurrection and constitution. Balibar states that the “idea of this differential of insurrection and constitution with the representation of a community without unity, in a process of reproduction and transformation” (Balibar, 2014, p. 9).

²² For instance, Joseph Stiglitz (1999), (2000) and (2006).

their society's constitution because, by excluding the voices of the many, they have limited their representation of society to their own experience of it.

In Arendt's terms, it is through the possibility to participate in the construction of a shared world that we come to have rights. In Balibar's Spinoza-infused philosophy, since it is in our interest – both as individuals and as collectives – to compose ourselves with others in a constructive manner we must strive to provide all of our constituent parts with equal possibilities of expression. It is in this way that *the process* of free speech is a public good: because opinions do not precede interaction but result from it. They are shaped through conflict, interaction, dialogue, *differend*²³ and excitable speech²⁴. Since we are as much subjects that speak as we are subjects to speech, it is in our collective interest to “liberate” as many sources of speech as possible. When speech is limited or circumscribed to a portion of society what happens is not just a limitation to its freedom (and therefore that of each one of us) but – in Spinoza's terms – a destruction of the power (*puissance*) carried by the process of communication. This is why freedom of speech is a public good that democratic constitutions must strive to maximize.

In the actual world, how may we approach thinking about freedom of speech as a public good? Unlike Habermas who seeks an “ideal speech situation” to serve as model for democratic institutions, Balibar thinks that the path towards “unconditioned” speech

²³ Balibar uses Jean-François Lyotard's concept of *différend* which may be understood as a form of injustice that occurs in language. Broadly speaking, *differend* is a conflict in which victims' wrongs cannot be presented because the rules are not applicable to both parties. For instance, in colonized lands, when indigenous peoples make claims for land, they cannot do so through the land rights established by their own laws or customs but have to operate under the law of the colonizers. Therefore, since their law is not considered valid, they are unable to present their wrong (Lyotard, 1984).

²⁴ Here he is referring to Judith Butler's *excitable speech*. Referring to how hate speech is framed as an illocutionary act only in its “performative” iterations but not in its ‘narrative’ forms, Butler argues that the use of such speech by state institutions perpetuates the damage that such speech does. She uses Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's ‘failed speech performances’ to argue that speech, because of its citational nature, always produces effects that are outside of our control (Butler, 2013).

must go through radically transforming already existing communication situations. To do this we must acknowledge that freedom of speech is always conditional. This is so, not only because economic, cultural and geopolitical elites tend to privatize material channels of distribution and production of contents, but also because their over-representation in the discursive sphere results in discursive forms that exclude and “other” those who do not conform to the realities and aspirations reflected in a “constituted” discourse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak” is an illustration of how this exclusion works. In her 1988 essay – by critiquing Foucault’s and Deleuze’s disavowed focus on the European subject – Spivak argued that they neglect the material conditions that shape discursive hegemonies, particularly in post-colonial situations in which only the ways of knowing of the colonizer are considered as legitimate and those of the “other” are ignored and anonymized.

Spivak’s insistence on the need to account for how material conditions determines who gets to be heard and who does not – which is in line with Balibar’s problematization of equal liberties – takes on new forms and dimensions as structures of power and their dissimulation evolve in the digital age. This is not only because newer forms of oppression and liberation emerge but also because the discursive sphere has, in large part, become globalized. Balibar explains that while discursive exclusions take place locally – most often at the state level as it is that of most institutions – the system of social recognition that legitimates certain identities while disqualifying others is – above all – shaped at the level of globalized discourse circulation. This linguistic hegemony can create expectations that are in line with elite experience such as saying that success is merely the result of “grit”, but can also contribute to the increased rights for certain

oppressed minorities in societies in which such language did not have a space to originate. We can see this, for instance, in how progressive legislative reforms across the world often follow values that have had the opportunity to develop within what I call “pockets of speech liberation” within the global north (e.g. gender rights and marriage equality).²⁵

Of course, discourse, being the product of human drive, does not always just work to provide descriptions and good faith assessments of the world that will allow people to compose themselves together in the most adequate way. Words can become tools of emotional attachment or, as Balibar – following Althusser – tells us: discourses have a way of interpellating people as they “require from them attachment and fidelity, impose guilt and recognition, dignity and shame, etc” (Balibar, 2018, p. 157). Ernst Cassirer had similar thoughts in 1946 with regards to the influence of fascism on the German language:

If we study our modern political myths and the use that has been made of them we find in them, to our great surprise, not only a transvaluation of all our ethical values but also a transformation of human speech. . . . New words have been coined, and even the old ones are used in a new sense; they have undergone a deep change of meaning. This change of meaning depends upon the fact that these words which formerly were used in a descriptive, logical, or semantic sense are now used as magic words that are destined to produce certain effects and to stir up certain emotions. Our ordinary words are charged with meanings; but these new-fangled words are charged with feelings and violent passions. (Cassirer & Cassirer, 1946, p. 238)

²⁵ Here we can see the role of academic institutions in allowing “pockets of speech liberation” that work as experimenting and tinkering grounds for the articulation of the experience of oppressed minorities, and as laboratories for the formation of concepts which later enter wider debates of justice and eventually codified rights. What is interesting here is how the concepts that emerge from these “pockets” may or may not gain force depending on the environment within which they emerge. For instance, concepts developed in the English-speaking sphere will have significantly more clout and circulation than those emerging from other academic spheres.

Words can certainly do many things. I would argue with Mouffe that words whose main purpose is to elicit emotion do not only work in nocive ways. “Magic words” – to use Cassirers’ expression – can also become the tools through which previously segmented and oppressed peoples might come together to form a public. Essentially “herding” words, in the sense that like a shepherd dog they draw the group together, their function must remain transitory if they are to have a constructive role in a democracy in which the process of freedom of speech is a public good.

There are also cases in which the meaning of words that elicit much emotion are nourished by experiences that are not visible or legible to the mainstream. While they seem like empty signifiers at a global or national level, they might be replete with signification for a subset of the population. Viewing the process of freedom of speech as a public good implies allowing some space for the emotional words of those who have been oppressed to allow for new formations to emerge. Freedom of speech as a public good would allow for spaces for these groups to “compose themselves together” in Spinoza’s terms. Following the philanthropic ethics of Spinoza, these spaces would be considered more as “pockets of speech liberation” rather than the more common notion of “safe spaces.” Whereas “safe” brings to mind an ever-present possibility of threat – a very Hobbesian stance, “speech liberation” highlights the immanent possibilities of these spaces.

Let us go back to the #MeToo example to illustrate how thinking of how the process of freedom of expression as a public good can lead us to reviving an epistemic project for democracy. Freedom of speech as a public good implies the equal liberties of its constituents, however it is clear that economic, racial, gender and other inequalities

shape in many ways who may be heard or might not. The #MeToo movement shows us the shortcomings of our contemporary mediated public landscape to make speech free, and the need for other forces – such as education – to tip the scales towards an environment that better allows for the participation of those who have been excluded in the constitution of public speech.

In line with Spinoza’s philanthropic conception of power (puissance), prior to the #MeToo movement’s viral stage, the movement’s originator Tarana Burke had been working for over a decade to promote “empowerment through empathy.” Burke, who at the time had founded Just BE Inc., a non-profit “focused on the health, well-being and wholeness of young women of color” (JustBEInc.),²⁶ came up with the expression “me too” after bonding with a girl who revealed to her that her mother boyfriend’s had been abusing her. After failing to express her sympathy to the girl, Burke realized that what she most regretted was that she had been unable to tell her something that would have made her feel less alone: “me too.”²⁷

It is at that time – when the movement was also more focused on the healing of victims than on raising awareness or, as it has come to be viewed, accusing perpetrators – that the movement worked more as a liberating space in the sense that Balibar understands freedom of speech as a public good. Burke’s regret stemmed from the fact that she had been unable to help the girl liberate her pain by failing to let her know that she was actually being heard, that she was not alone in her circumstances. Burke herself now explains how important this empathy is for young women to retrieve their

²⁶ Retrieved from <https://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/home> on 2/2/19.

²⁷ Burke’s account can be found on her foundation’s website: <https://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/the-me-too-movement-cmml>

“wholeness.” This “wholeness” – which is Burke’s own word– is reminiscent of transindividuality. That is, the idea that we are composite beings who require a responsive environment in order to thrive. In the end, despite Burke’s failure to respond to this girl, resulted in Burke’s articulation of the short expression of “me too”, something that ended up having an impact in the lives of many. Thereby showing the connective power that words can have. In fact, Burke’s words during an interview beautifully capture the spirit of what viewing the process of freedom of speech as a public good is like. To explain how the movement is open to different perspectives – and not just those of women – and that it is also there to support whoever needs it, she compares it to a tree whose fruits can be shared and its seeds replanted:

If I found a healing tree in my backyard and it grew some sort of fruit that was a healing balm for people to repair what was damaged, I'm not going to just harvest all of those fruits and say 'you can't have this'. If I have a cure for people, I'm going to share it. I'm going to keep growing it and I want you to take some, plant some in your yard, and you plant some in your yard, and you plant some in your yard, let's all grow this thing that's going to heal us. I don't own 'Me Too'. I may have come up with the idea and had the spark of the thing, but nobody owns it. And nobody can designate who can and can't use it, nobody can designate how somebody responds to it, that's awful. It's bigger than any of our lives, it's for whoever it is for. (Burke, 2017, December, 23)

Burke’s comparison to trees whose fruits can be shared and seeds can be replanted corresponds to the definition of a public good as a good that does not exclude anyone from use and participation and whose use by one individual does not reduce the availability of the good to others. In this case the good was the healing that comes through the utterance of the words “me too” in a responsive context.²⁸ In fact, in Burke’s iteration of the movement the expression “me too” is used in small gatherings or in one-

²⁸ We will see later how as the movement became more viral it came to be seen more as a movement to denounce rather than heal, and in Chapter V we will see how the words “me too” if uttered in particular ways and contexts may function as true communication in John Dewey’s sense.

on-one sessions in which victims can share their experiences with trained conversation facilitators. In Chapter V, in which I put in conversation John Dewey's and Etienne Balibar's theories of communication, I will expand on how this responsiveness is crucial to viewing the process of freedom of speech as a public good.

For now, I continue to examine how – as we look at how the movement evolved from being a grassroots movement to a global viral campaign – we can see how its different stages of mediatization revealed an interplay between the liberation and the privatization of speech which also impacts its epistemic aspect – at times undermining it and at times amplifying it. I explain:

MeToo only became viral, that is, a movement at the national and global stage after exceptionally visible people (Hollywood actresses) came out to the public through extremely powerful people: a particularly visible journalist (Ronan Farrow) and world-renowned publications (*The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine) from a global city. That is, it only became viral when it entered into a sphere that is private in the sense that it is a sphere into which only the voices of the extremely visible and often financially advantaged people can enter.²⁹ The discourse within this sphere is thus nourished almost exclusively by these voices. It reflects their values, imaginations, projections of reality and aspirations. Perhaps what is most telling about the values carried in such discourse is that the movement came to be associated more for its denunciation of Harvey Weinstein – a visible and powerful person – than for the capacity of the “me too” words to comfort and heal victims.

²⁹ It is worth mentioning that in this case, as in many others that have come into public attention, it took a long time for the speech of these famous actresses to become “liberated” because of the non-disclosure clauses that act to give corporations power over the speech of human persons.

Undoubtedly, the iteration of the #MeToo movement that emerged in the wake of the Weinstein scandal has opened up a myriad of opportunities for victims to find spaces to express their experiences and for discussions to take place about the pervasiveness of the problem. However, in line with the responsiveness what both Burke and Balibar suggest, the energy and the expression that these openings allow for need some level of reception, dialogue or back and forth in order for them to become constitutive of lasting change. With the virality of the hashtag, the conversational requirement of the healing process was undermined as the one-to-many kind of transmission of social media does not necessarily result in meaningful responses, and is more salient for its aggregative capacities. As the movement came to be associated to a particular perpetrator, the function of the hashtag came to be perceived more as a means of pointing out perpetrators and exposing the extent of the problem rather than of the healing and empowerment of the victims. As the movement entered the disembodied realm of the digital, it became more of a “he said, she said” Power (*pouvoir*) exchange rather than a problem happening in the real world needing a common social response. This response does not only concern the victims of abuse, but also reflecting on what might be the larger social condition that drives abusers to their actions. In fact, even the purpose of raising awareness among the wider public about the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence seems to have backfired. According to a poll conducted by YouGov for The Economist magazine on November 2017 and repeated at the end of September 2018,³⁰ the number of American adults who think false accusations of sexual assault are a bigger problem than attacks that go unreported or unpunished has risen from 13% to 18%.

³⁰ <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/10/20/measuring-the-metoo-backlash>

Concomitantly, when asked if they believed that men who sexually harassed women 20 years ago should be able to keep their jobs— in 2017, 28% thought they should, whereas in 2018, 36% did. These figures have come to be so removed of the lived experiences of both victims, perpetrators and their communities that it is difficult to know what to make of them. But the most devastating form of privatization of speech is how adhering to or rejecting the #MeToo movement came to be matter of alignment to a political party. The same poll indicated that the most marked division among the people polled was between Democrats and Republicans, particularly after the conflict over Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court. This is a form of privatization of the process of speech because it inscribes it within opposing discourses that resist "learning" from each other, and surrenders the constitutive power of the process of free speech to a competition between two constituted – now– antagonistic³¹ positions.

In the current context of pervasive mediatization in which our expressions are captured as data that serves to inform what contents will keep us engaged on particular social media platforms or television channels for the longest time, these identifications become markets to conquer. Segregation becomes technologically reinforced and the breach between our identities also becomes a breach between the way we express ourselves. The common language with which we are supposed to communicate comes to be hollowed of its substance making it vulnerable to appropriation by those who seek to seduce us to join their ends. On our end as everyday people, as we become personally implicated in these identities, we cease to respond to each other's judgements and opinions but rather to each other's identities.

³¹ Since in these times of intense polarization few would call the relation between the American Republican and the Democratic parties agonistic.

The manner in which the #MeToo movement evolved into a viral one does not illustrate that when a situation of oppression reaches a point of unbearability it becomes a matter of public concern, or something that must be discussed and addressed collectively. What it does show is how, in an environment of technologically-enabled shifting publics, those withstanding unbearable situations are only given the choice to pour out their grief into whatever identity becomes available. In the case of the “me too” movement, the movement gained visibility because, as it concerns an issue that cuts across race, class and income lines, it was allowed as space in the mainstream public sphere revealing how this sphere is, in fact, privatized. If we contrast this to Balibar’s call to view the process of free speech as a public good in which discourse must be shaped by a plurality requiring the equal access to all of its constituents, then we are reminded of how far we are from such a reality, and how education – not only within traditional institutions of education – might help us advance towards a goal of a more egalitarian access to the mainstream discursive sphere.

Conclusion

In Spinozan terms, as we adapt to the novel configurations into which we are thrust by the digital, we must keep in mind the importance of viewing the process of free speech as a public good. The potential for more adequate constitutions exists as “pockets of speech liberation” emerge as a variety of interactions occur in a networked manner, allowing to a certain extent an unprecedented plurality of experiences to find in-group spaces of exchange and commonality. Like-minded people, people with common experiences, interests, grievances and understandings get to exchange speech and from

there build common meanings and concepts that can later be inserted into wider, more institutionalized conversations and thereby make their rights a reality. The challenge is also one of speed to see how at a time when we are inundated with information, opinions and feelings, we give ourselves the chance to take the time to think through what it is that we really need and want as individuals and as collectives. It is also to see how concept of public good might survive in a context in which hegemonic discourses are pitted against each other in a war-like manner often without really reflecting the realities of people.

In Spinozan terms, a view of freedom of speech as public good seeks to enable more adequate compositions within collectives. Otherwise, when we allow hegemonic discourses to take over our own thinking, as Spinoza reminds us, we are seduced by the speech of fear and we project our desires of self-preservation on an authority figure who we see as having free will. The task of the next chapter of this dissertation will be to reflect on how education both as a philosophy but also as a series of practices and institutions that exist within an environment of constraints and possibilities might contribute to this conception of the process of free speech as public good.

Chapter V

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

As I hope to have conveyed throughout this dissertation, digital communications significantly unsettle the ways in which people “know” themselves and the collective and how they seek to achieve collective action. Limiting the ways in which we attempt to construct meaning – that is, to “know” ourselves as collectives and as individuals and to know what the public good might be – to institutional spheres is clearly insufficient in the digital age. While Habermas shows us how certain communication conditions are necessary for legitimate political action, and Mouffe reminds us that the differing conditions of our experiences result in the constitution of different discourses that struggle for hegemony, Balibar insists on the necessity of transforming the actually existing, on-the-ground space of “imperfect communication” by seeking the equal participation of voices.

In 2000, Manuel Castells claimed that “political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of instrumental flows, and cultural codes, embedded in networks” (Castells, 2000, p. 24). While the idea that political institutions are not the site of power any longer is perhaps debatable, the insight about the mounting power of cultural codes seems increasingly prescient. The premise of this chapter is that

the digital age is characterized by two opposing tendencies: the prominence of a global discursive sphere which present a series of unifying discourses, but also that it is also an age in which we face common global challenges which most often directly affect those who have the least influence on these discourses (e.g. those most affected by climate change). While, in theory, there are opportunities for the voices of the many to constitute these discourses, in practice, it is often only the voices and experiences of a privileged few that inundate and shape them. These powerful discourses seek to claim legitimacy as reflectors of social realities but also work to shape social and political realities, and to become the repositories of words, expressions and ways of thinking on which we draw upon to describe our own experiences. As in Althusser's analysis, discourses (ideologies) have a way of interpellating us demanding our loyalty, awarding us recognition and dignity but also imposing guilt and shame when we stray away from them.

In terms of social epistemologies, as with any shift in communication technologies, the digital establishes its own set of conditions. With the shift from a mass-media structure to a dual-track media landscape – broadly composed of broadcast media and networked media – professional journalism's shortcomings in reflecting the realities and values of regular people have also worked to delegitimize the authority of knowledge that requires specific expertise (e.g. science). Along with this dynamic, the capacity of networked media to reflect experienced realities is all the more ambivalent: On the one hand, as the now widespread idea that we are in a "post-truth era" evokes, contents circulating in the digital realm that do not have any grounding on material reality (e.g. "fake news") also have place and currency within such space. On the other hand, networked media also works very closely to the daily and on-the-ground realities of

people, facilitates local organizing, the articulation of local and subaltern knowledges and the exchange of opinions among regular people. The tension between these tendencies is exacerbated by the concentration of power and capital that characterizes the globalized economy as well as the commercial model that most of media institutions rely on.

Now that I have developed an approach to democratic subjectivity that puts freedom of speech as a public good at the forefront, in this chapter I revisit this dissertation's research question by reformulating it as: what role can education have to help preserve the epistemic aspect of democracy in a world in which the digital is both brimming with participatory potential but also the ground of ruthless competition between powerful and alluring discourses seeking to shape our shared reality? I suggest that if democracy is to retain its epistemic dimension, the role of education is to define, preserve and promote the *process* of free speech as a *public good*. A public good that has the ideal of becoming shaped through the equal participation of its constituents, but that is also informed by the knowledge and experience of past generations and of experts (whose expertise may also be read as being the product of their time, position and context, and therefore must be prudently evaluated).

To this end, I first examine the mainstream definition of education and its relation to democracy, I then go back to the transindividual definition of democratic subjectivity suggested in Chapter IV and suggest that Dewey's theory of communication can serve as a basis for developing a philosophy of education based on Balibar's idea of freedom of speech. I go on to suggest the localism of Dewey's pragmatism as a caveat. I argue thus that in today's increasingly interdependent yet increasingly segregated world, in order to heed to the goal of equal liberty that Balibar advances, pragmatic democratic inquiry

requires addressing the question of the “veil” of ignorance as understood by Balibar. I end the chapter by advancing that in the digital age the kind of responsive communication that constitutes true education often occurs outside of traditional education institutions in a decentralized manner and that if we are to view the process of public speech as a public good we need an approach to education that foregrounds the subjectivity of the “other” as someone with whom we need to enter into dialogue.

Education Today – Beyond Individualism

In its report “What Makes a School a Learning Organization” the OECD tells us that “[t]oday’s schools must equip students with the knowledge and skills they’ll need to succeed in an uncertain, constantly changing tomorrow.” It is difficult to know what the OECD means by “succeed” as the term is never defined in the text, but what is most puzzling is the focus on an “uncertain, constantly changing tomorrow.” Is it outside forces that are conjuring against each one of us? Are we just dropped into this hostile world once we are done with our schooling? Is individual adaptation our sole means of survival? Can we not continue to *build* a world together? Doubtless it is not the first time we confront a “constantly changing tomorrow.” What is different perhaps is that for the first time as humanity we face the common challenge of climate change and environmental depletion.

Educational policy has primarily become concerned with the development of human productivity for economic growth and with ensuring that individuals have the means to become financially self-sufficient as productive workers. Policies encourage competition between schools, investing on technology, and promoting the standardization

of measurable contents. Economic growth – believed to ultimately ensure human wellbeing – is the driving goal of these policies. Learning is presented as how the student obtains skills and competences to navigate an uncertain world.

In an article comparing students to autonomous vacuum cleaners, Gert Biesta (2016) critiques what he calls the *learnification* of education, that is, an idea of learning that focuses on purely cognitive and ego-centered processes. Biesta advances that the student-centered approach presupposes that students, in their engagement with their environment, treat what they encounter as objects to be mastered and transformed or external things to be hermeneutically apprehended in an internal process of cognition. In this kind of relationship there is no subject-to-subject relation: the world is subordinate to the needs of cognition of the inquiring subject.

Biesta is rightly concerned that this approach is in connivance with increasing inequalities which favor a select few and pushes those in structurally disadvantaged positions to view themselves as having the sole responsibility for their own fates. As it were, this individualist view of learning, in its impetus to prepare students to adapt themselves to changing environments, is more aligned with the neoliberal imperative of becoming competitive in a globalized market than of becoming critical of the larger structures of oppression and environmental depletion that this same ideology perpetuates and accentuates.

However, while Biesta is right in his concerns, he is mistaken about who he attributes this “egological” approach to learning: pragmatists and John Dewey in particular.¹ Gregory and Laverty, in a 2017 response to Biesta, argue that he

¹ Biesta’s position is intriguing given his previous scholarship on Dewey and intersubjectivity.

misunderstands how the pragmatic approach considers learning to take place. They argue that pragmatism as an approach to language and as a philosophy is not centered on the individual but “promotes inquiry as a socially embedded, experimental and indeterminate process of self/world reconstruction” (Gregory & Lavery, 2017, p. 521).

In agreement with Gregory and Lavery that Dewey’s approach to education² is a permanent process of co-construction of individual and community, in this section of the chapter, I advance that in the digital age, Dewey’s philosophy of education can provide the basis upon which we can build a contemporary philosophy of education that defines, promotes and preserves the process of freedom of speech as a public good. While Balibar uses Austin’s “speech act theory” to foreground the forward orientation, reciprocity, and commonality of meaning-making as well as its embeddedness in action, I suggest here that Dewey’s theory of communication – despite preceding Austin’s by 50 years – provides an adequate basis to what Balibar wants to get to when he speaks of the process of freedom of speech as a public good. What drives me to put Balibar’s Spinoza-infused ideas in conversation with Dewey’s is not only their common rejection of traditional dualisms (body/mind, individual/community, people/government) and the view of speech as action found in both theories, but also the fact that Dewey articulates his theory of education as a theory of communication (Biesta, 2006). This is helpful as Balibar does not directly engage with education. This linking also acts as a bookend to the discussion about Dewey’s view of democracy in the second chapter of this dissertation.

² Which we will see is also his approach to communication.

Communication: I Hear You Saying...

In consonance with Balibar's conception of freedom of speech not as a personal freedom, but as a *transindividual dialogic process*, for Dewey, meaning and the constitution of our collective and individual selves is shaped through communication. While Dewey's philosophy is mostly known for the centrality he gives to experience in learning, for him, communication is at the heart not only of meaning-making but also of what makes us human, that is, live and interdependent beings. For him, experience is futile if not communicated. In fact, the stirring phrase with which he begins the fifth chapter of *Experience and Nature* unmistakably attests to the centrality of communication in his philosophy:

Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful... [its] fruit... participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales. When communication occurs all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation whether it be public discourse, or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. (Dewey, 1925/1958, p. 166)

Here Dewey presents communication as a tool for reflexivity and creativity. The complexity of experience becomes malleable, classifiable, systematizable and shareable when it is put into a communicable form. Experience comes to have meaning through communication, it is allowed to come side-by-side with the experiences of others in order to receive confirmation or to shape new things collectively. Communication is available to all and ultimately contributes to the constitution of our singular and collective selves.

Balibar seeks a model of freedom of speech in which speech is viewed "as a dialogical process including a reciprocity of effects and an anticipated response to 'speech acts' which is preserved or destroyed" (Balibar, 2018, p. 150). In fact, Dewey's formal definition of communication highlights precisely its inter-active nature. For

Dewey communication is “the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership.” (p. 179). It is through this cooperation, and not just through individual experience, that meaning is produced. In this process person A and person B coordinate their actions around a thing in such a way that “B’s understanding of A’s movement and sounds is that he responds to the thing from the standpoint of A, that is perceiving the thing as it may function in A’s experience, instead of simply egocentrically.” (Dewey, 1925/1958, p. 141). In other words, communication happens when I respond to your expression of your experience of the thing rather than to my own experience of the thing. This view of communication as a co-construction of meaning also presupposes its sharing. Contrary to a purely transactional conception of communication, Dewey puts forward a distinctly cooperative process in which a common understanding is created as much as a common world is shared.

Your Freedom, My Freedom, Our Freedom

Similarly, to how Spinoza views speech – not as an expression of the freedom of the will – but as a way of rearrange ourselves as individuals and collectives by making explicit the affects that circulate within and among us (Sharp, 2011), Dewey explains that

[e]vents when once they are named lead an independent and double life. In addition to their original existence, they are infinitely combined and re-arranged in imagination, and the outcome of this inner experimentation – which is thought – may issue forth in interaction with crude or raw events. (Dewey, 1933/2008b, p. 166)

This passage suggests that thought, for Dewey, points to an active force that we constitute together and that also helps us create in the world. In this way, thought makes us free. Intelligence is another term that Dewey uses for thought, and in the following

passage of *On Democracy* he explicitly states that true democratic freedom is freedom that produces intelligence:

The democratic idea of freedom is not the right of each individual to do as he pleases/ even if it be qualified by adding "provided he does not interfere with the same freedom on the part of others." While the idea is not always, not often enough, expressed in words, *the basic freedom is that of freedom of mind* and of whatever degree of freedom of action and experience is necessary to produce freedom of intelligence. (Dewey, 1937, p. 458)

Democratic freedom thus is necessarily constitutive of a larger form of intelligence. It seems thus that Balibar's conception of freedom of speech as public good is close to what Dewey means by "thought", or "intelligence." Freedom of speech for Balibar is what allows us to make stronger our individual and collective compositions, which is something that can be viewed as growth. For Dewey, it is through thinking that we grow and exercise our freedom both in thinking and acting:

The great reward of exercising the power of thinking is that there are no limits to the possibility of carrying over into the objects and events of life, meaning originally acquired by thoughtful examination and hence no limit to the continual growth of meaning in human life. (Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 128)

Thinking therefore both as an individual and collective endeavor is an indeterminate process that has unlimited and unimagined potential in human life.

Now that I have established the converging direction in which Balibar's and Dewey's thoughts go, in the following section, I explain how Dewey's philosophy of education, as it is essentially a theory of communication, can form a basis for a philosophy of education in which the process freedom of speech is considered a public good. Then, by using the metaphor of the veil, evoked both by Balibar and W.E.B Du Bois, I suggest the need for rethinking Dewey's philosophy for plural democracies and in

a globalized world. I conclude the chapter by proposing practical applications for education in the digital age.

Education as Communication

Dewey explains that “Education consists primarily of transmission through communication” (1916/2008, p.12), not in a process of “direct contagion” or “literal inculcation” (p. 14) but as a “process of sharing experience until it becomes a common possession.” With this definition one wonders when there can actually be education. Clearly Dewey does not mean that education can only occur when I can have the same experience as the other. There are certainly varying degrees and dimensions to communication. For example, as we age and go through different experiences in life, we realize how much things we were told by our elders in our youth suddenly become filled with meaning: the parents of a newborn only come to fully understand other parents’ exclamations of “they grow so fast!” once they see their own baby has “grown so fast” herself. But even when these expressions are heard and received without grasping their fuller meaning, they are felt as being normal. There is no cultural dissonance within them. It is precisely the normalcy of that kind of exclamation that renders it communicable. It is the little components of the idea that are rearranged in the daily back-and-forth of our relations that makes them shareable.

For Dewey learning requires interaction with one’s environment. It is always embedded in culture. Experience is not always educative – it can in fact be miseducative– therefore those involved in the educative endeavor must arrange the learner’s environment for it to be conducive to learning. More specifically, it is through inquiry

that Dewey believed shared meanings can be purposefully developed. Inquiry begins with identifying a problematic situation or an obstacle that prevents growth or advancement. Then, it calls inquirers to proceed methodically, reflexively and to emit hypotheses that are eventually tested in a real-life situation.

In a democracy, inquiry can be a means for a group of people to challenge established authority when its conclusions differ with the status quo, therefore having a function of democratic self-correction. As inquiry is context-bound, for Dewey, schools are the ultimate spaces for democratic reform. It is in schools that communities of inquiry may bring students of different backgrounds and experiences together as they prepare for a life as inquiring participants of the larger communities within which they live.

In *The Public and its Problems*, published a decade after *Democracy and Education* in the context of shifting technological and social conditions, Dewey advanced that the influence of special interests, powerful capital and the distractions of entertainment were causing the public of face-to-face communities to eclipse. However, he was optimistic about the potential of communication technologies to unite dispersed and fragmented publics. He wrote that the “Great Community” would only emerge when

[t]he highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it. (Dewey, 1984, p. 350)

Doubtless if he lived to this day, Dewey would have marveled at the capacity and speed at which digital technologies connect people across the world. However, he maybe would have recoiled at how the ways in which we try to connect often become one-way missives and spectacles that do not receive the necessary back-and-forth required to make meaning. He would have shrieked at how words and expressions are quickly hollowed

out of their meanings, and appropriated by people with private interests as in the example in Chapter IV, in which Tarana Burke's "me too" was eroded of its meaning and transformed into something else. He would have maybe wondered about what to make of the fragmentation of the public into competing spheres seeking to impose their view of "legitimate knowledge" over others.

Almost a century later, in a context of abundant exchange of information across the globe, Balibar also calls for a kind of responsive communication, not by suggesting a finalized idea of a "great community" but by calling elites who are the main "shapers" of mainstream discourse to realize the exclusive nature of their speech and to learn to listen and respond to the voices of the those who had not been granted a space at the table. In short, for Balibar, it is elites that need to be educated to view their freedom as inscribed within the freedom of all the collective. Balibar uses the metaphor of the veil which he inverts from John Rawls' idea of the *veil of ignorance*. While in Rawls' theory this veil, by hiding the status of the participants of a speech situation, stands to guarantee that everyone's opinion is given the same weight in a fictional setting, for Balibar, the veil is the result of the uneven distribution of power that happens in real communication situations. Mainstream public discourse is shaped by those who have the means, not only because they have material access to spaces of influence, but also because, as discourse has been shaped by them, it reflects their experience and values.

It is remarkable this metaphor of the veil was also used by W.E.B. Du Bois – a contemporary of Dewey – in his 1903 book of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*. Similarly, to Balibar, Du Bois used the metaphor of the veil as a way of describing what keeps the dominant class from knowing the composition of the whole. While Balibar writes about

the veil of ignorance in the French context to refer to the ignorance of the French mainstream about the French Muslim experience, Du Bois used the metaphor to speak about what separated Black Americans from American life. For Du Bois, it was the veil that drove white Americans to structure institutions and society in ways that excluded the black experience. At a stronger, ontological level, it was this veil that prevented whites from viewing black people as American and, even, as fully human. And in turn, the veil also kept black people from seeing themselves beyond the image projected onto them by white society. Du Bois' essays decried all that was being lost by not allowing Blacks to fully develop their potential. This was a loss not only to Black people but also to the American people and humanity as a whole.

More than a century later, the veil separating black Americans from white ones persists. Despite a long struggle of black Americans for civil rights, despite the election of Barack Obama, the first black American president, not only does segregation and mass incarceration persist but also the experience of black Americans is not only put to the side and more often than not blacks are portrayed by the media in ways that reproduce racial inequality (Van Dijk, 2015).

However, this exclusion by race is but one form of exclusion in an increasingly urban, plural and globalized world. Exclusions that happen within the United States, for example, take shape through an excessive influence of corporate interests on public matters, increasingly centralized forms of professional journalism³ and high inequalities

³ As mentioned in the Introduction, the emergence of the internet precipitated a crisis of professional local journalism. Many small newspapers have had to shut down, and those that remain rely on wire service services to report on what is happening in Washington. These services do not tailor to the needs of small local communities such as reporting on their representatives. See Pew Research Center, 2015. <http://www.journalism.org/2015/12/03/the-role-of-wire-services/>.

in access to quality education. At the global level, these exclusions take shape as global corporations avoid regulation throughout their supply chain, and the populations who are most affected by the actions of these corporations have little to no means to bringing voicing their experience. For instance, Coltan, a mineral used in the manufacturing of cellphones and other electronics is mostly mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its mining often involves child labor, is implicated in the Congolese conflict, exposes local populations to toxic chemicals, and causes devastating environmental damage in a region of tropical forests of high biodiversity. Despite attempts to regulate such mining, these exploitative conditions, and irreparable damage to the environment, including carbon-sucking rainforest— persists. Situations like these are complex and involve a variety of actors, so there is no point in moralizing to consumers about electronics or cellphones. What is important – if we think of free speech as public good – is trying to figure out ways for the voices of those affected by such conditions to be heard by institutions that actually can do something to improve their situation and that of the environment. While I cannot provide easy answers to complex issues like these, I do believe that contrary to fatalist creeds that advance that “there is no alternative” can be countered if we use our imaginations, and these become richer when we give ourselves the opportunity to create responsive conditions of communication. This is how, as we acknowledge our interdependence, we must strive to lift the veil which is clouding our perception from the larger picture, from coming to know ourselves, and from building a world that is sustainable and in which there is room for all to flourish.

Education in the Digital Age

Education as communication in Dewey's conception compels us to endeavor to retrieve meaning in the deluge of signs and noise of digital technology. The iterative back-and-forth between people and their environment that, for him, meaningful communication requires also coincides with Spinoza's transindividual ontology in which we must seek the most "adequate compositions" amongst each other in order to achieve the greatest strength. In the digital age, not only new spaces of meaningful communication emerge but also spaces in which meaningful communication takes place can also become visible through networked media. On the flip side, hollowed-out words serve demagogues to shape discourses that seduce those who haven't been able to parse-out their experience or who simply benefit from preserving the status-quo.

As the world grows increasingly interdependent, even the most privileged will suffer the consequences of not working together to address the global challenges such as that of climate change. While technological solutions may be suggested as a way out, as these solutions carry the bias of their creators, it is crucial to find ways of including the voices of the most. Education thus presupposes the cultivation of the desire for equality as a means towards the condition of equal liberties that will ultimately result in the growth of the greater whole. In this sense, education is concerned with growth – human growth understood as what results from viewing freedom of speech as a public good. This growth is nourished by plurality, it therefore is also concerned for the wellbeing of people and the possibility for everybody to live a dignified life in which we can all flourish. Growth is the result of a "transindividual dialogical exchange" –to use Balibar's expression – and is not teleological. It implies viewing democracy not as a "regime"

but as an ensemble of dynamic combinations. In this view of growth involves ongoing interactions in which discourses are in agonistic tension but consensus is also a possibility. Words are coined, appropriated but also re-appropriated by oppressed groups as with Butler's "excitable speech." This kind of growth should be education's priority, and economic growth should be subordinate to it, not the other way around.

Given the growing interdependence of the world, civic education is not detached from other types of scholarly pursuits. As we will see in the examples below, the sharing both of experiential and specialized knowledge must be protected by those involved in education. In what follows I suggest that, in the digital age, viewing education as the means towards ensuring that the process of freedom of speech is actually a public good, reposes on four major efforts: First, it compels us to seek out ways of allowing for spaces in which all, but particularly historically oppressed people may grow, develop and contribute to the greater good, this includes taking into account the material conditions that might be preventing this growth; Second, it inscribes the need to address common problems by learning to "listen" to those who have been historically marginalized; Third, it seeks to ensure everybody's right to access constituted bodies of knowledge. Fourth, it seeks to create spaces in which collaboration across ideological divides for a common goal occurs.

1. Promoting Growth in Decentralized Pockets of Speech Liberation: Education for democracy which conceives freedom of speech as a public good implies seeking out ways of allowing for spaces in which historically oppressed people may grow and develop. While Dewey's belief in education as a "method of social progress and reform"

reposed on the capacity of schools to be catalyzing spaces for such reform, for a number of factors including the increased push for evaluation and standardization of contents schools are often spaces in which different forms of oppression and cultural de-valuation are perpetuated.

Nowadays, learning that leads to social progress often occurs outside of schools, and this is particularly the case in the digital age. There are abundant examples of youth civic engagement that leverage digital tools and networks (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017), and scholarship documenting the many online and offline civic practices of youth often looks to dispelling myths of youth disengagement and apathy towards civic life. Minority youth are often regarded through the lens of being “at risk”, a view that labels them as such and overlooks the many meaningful communicative practices and potentials in their lives (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). In fact, in recent years, the claims of minorities and groups underrepresented in the political sphere have gained more visibility thereby unsettling dominant narratives that have shaped American identity. Not only have these groups been able to claim their presence on the mainstream public sphere, but also through the connective affordances of digital media they have been able to internally “compose” themselves so as to become stronger. They are able to name aspects of their experience and to articulate how it fits within larger spheres of actions. Furthermore, expressions relayed on social media have had a role in exposing practices and patterns of oppression and violence against marginalized minorities. While much of the collective expressions emerge spontaneously as people engage with media, there are also important pedagogical “interventions” that take place within these groups as more experienced activists support the work of novices and parameters of effective practice are established

and shared. Collective learning takes place through connecting experiences, finding patterns, naming them in order to be able to insert them into wider conversations.

An example of this is the recent visibility of the persistence of police brutality against black people. Through the multimodal affordances of digital media, the real-time immediacy that mobile devices allow for, and the easy distribution that social media enables, victims and witnesses of such violence have been able to document events in detail and to distribute and circulate their depictions as well as their reactions to them through viral media. These pieces of evidence, combined with the discussions surrounding them have ultimately served to support the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement (henceforth BLM movement).⁴ The development of core idea of the movement – which is that the lives of black Americans are not valued in the same way as those of other Americans – is a form of developing collective intelligence by putting a name on an experience. Furthermore, by articulating what otherwise would have remained in the “plane of external pushing and pulling” – to use Dewey’s words – the movement has unsettled imaginaries of a post-racial America in which people are treated equally – a narrative that had gained strength after the election of Obama. Movements like BLM show us that learning for social change happens very much outside the classroom and at the initiative of those concerned by a common experience of grievance. Education which seeks the maximization of growth must seek to facilitate spaces for

⁴This internationally visible movement emerged through the use of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag on social media. In 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of black 17-year old Trayvon Martin, community organizer Alicia Garza wrote a Facebook post in which said: “Our Lives Matter: Black Lives Matter” to which artist and activist Patrisse Cullors responded with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags – which are used as tags on social media to make messages searchable – allow users to easily find the messages related to the theme of the hashtag.

those whose voice has been neglected to enter the dialogue that enriches of their country as well as human experience overall.

Clearly not all educative spaces emerge spontaneously. Some spaces need to be supported facilitated. More often than not these educative spaces take place within the community of those involved. A concrete example of an initiative that seeks to facilitate the development of growth among marginalized communities is the Filmbug initiative in India, which organizes filmmaking workshops for children in a variety of situations. During the workshop youth come up with an idea for a short film, go through the various processes of scripting, storyboarding, shooting and editing a film. Films are ultimately screened at a film festival. Projects like these that are not necessarily initiated by educators, can be leveraged by more experienced education scholars and practitioners who may contribute to the educative endeavor with their expertise.

In the spirit of inquiry as a local endeavor, scholars in the global south are increasingly associating with local communities in order to gain their insights and co-construct knowledge on issues of common importance such as the conservation of biodiversity. An example of this is the work a group of Colombian researchers from the National University is conducting in association with local fishermen for the conservation of an endangered crocodile. The fishermen contribute with their knowledge about where the crocodile lives, where it can be found at different times as well as its habits, while the researchers teach them how to breed them. Mongabay, a website dedicated to environmental journalism documented the process.

At the K-12 level, an activity that can promote an awareness of the “fullness” and complexity of geographically removed others is what I would call “parallel inquiries.”

This activity could take place in schools or other education spaces located in at least two different spaces either within the same country or in different countries. Student would engage in inquiry about a topic of common interest. In the United States, for instance, students in a school in one state could pair up with students in another state to investigate something like how the electricity that their community consumes is produced. Students would regularly communicate online throughout the process of coming up with a research question that is relevant to both sites, designing the research, building a literature review, collecting data and coming up with a way of conveying findings to a broader public. This kind of activity could potentially help students not only develop collaborative skills across geographies but also, at a time of increasing polarization that is often felt along geographical lines, find common ground and create something together. If one of the groups of students comes mostly from a privileged background, their work with a group of students of less privilege might help awaken their desire for more equality.

2. The challenge of listening: The lifting of the veil of incomplete social knowledge requires the responsive attitude of those who are in a position of privilege. Balibar reminds us that these situations of imperfect communication are part of our everyday lives. However, in rapidly evolving flow of social media news feeds and unfocused online navigation we seldom give ourselves time to pause and reflect upon the messages we encounter. Moreover, we rarely encounter contents from outside our preference given our own natural tendency to seek out familiar contents which is also reinforced by algorithms. Initiatives like the ones above abound but their reception is often limited. In these cases, schools can be adequate spaces for the re-contextualization

of contents that circulate online. By integrating these videos and multimodal artifacts into meaningful lesson plans teachers can enlarge student's perspectives and attempt to offer a dialogical perspective. Students can encounter the unexpected and seek to integrate it into wider reflections that involve their own lives. These contents should be integrated into lessons keeping in mind that true educative experiences require the interactive process of true communication in which we strive to decenter our experience of an object through the perception of someone else's expression of the same object.

For instance, a video of an indigenous leader from the Amazon who is explaining how the struggle to preserve their territory is tied in with environmental sustainability. Students might view this video and reflect upon how the person represented as someone in another context who, as any human being, is confronted to the conditions of her environment and strives to act within it. While students might be able to relate to some of her experience, they must be encouraged to distance themselves from believing that they fully understand what she is going through.

When teachers select materials, they should take into account how the voices of minorities are presented. Mainstream media representations of minorities tend to focus on their status of oppression. Given their non-constitutive position in mainstream discourse, minorities cannot enter this discursive sphere in their own terms. Minority-made media, and media in which minorities come across as empowered exists and is being increasingly produced. Educators must seek out these contents and present them to students as a way of showing that encountering these contents is an opening to dialog.

3. Ensuring the right to access constituted sources of constituted knowledge:

Freedom of speech as a public good also requires the free flow of constituted knowledge.

Open access scholarly publication is crucial if we are to consider this freedom in a constitutive way. Given the local nature of many kinds of knowledge, it is imperative to be able to freely share and access constituted knowledge which can reveal not only the state of the research, but also best practices, possible collaborations and contributions, and develop scholarly discourse that is informed by a diversity of experiences.

Thinking freedom of speech as a process that is a public good to which, also reminds us of the provisional nature of scientific knowledge. At a time when anti-scientific discourse gains ground, it reiterates that trust is built through inclusion in processes. Trust is built when people believe that researchers are working for the public good and not for other interests. While work that is inscribed within the goals of

Beyond scientific knowledge, digital technologies put into question single narratives about the human experience as developed in the humanities. If the way we have made sense of the human experience is profoundly biased towards the European experience, given the to the conservation and continued conversation within from that tradition (due to factors ranging from technologies such as the book to imperial endeavors) as well as its impact on the real world, freedom of speech as public good also implies making knowledge from such tradition freely available to whomever wants or needs to engage with it. Ideas that have for long constituted the world and how we talk about it will only be challenged and worlds will only be made to better fit the “other” when the “other” has had the chance to engage with the dominant tradition in a dialogical manner. With regards to other traditions, digitalization can also be a tool of conservation, revitalization and dissemination. For instance, through the Amoxcalli digitizing project, researchers in Mexico can now access the many pre-Columbian Mexican codices that are

currently in different institutions around the world. Many of these codices, despite having been well conserved in European and American institutions, have not been studied there. Now that researchers in Mexican institutions can at least have access to digital copies, the contents of these codices might find a more responsive reception and will be more meaningfully integrated into a wider body of knowledge.

4. Cooperating across ideological divides for a common goal: One last effort for promoting meaningful communication is designing spaces in which people of different ideologies are compelled to cooperate for a common goal. One example of such a space is Wikipedia. According to a study by Shi, Teplipski, Duede and Evans (2019) ideologically polarized teams of Wikipedia editors produced higher quality articles than more homogeneous teams. Through an analysis of Wikipedia “talk” pages – in which editors discuss behind the scenes about contents that will be posted on the articles– they observed that politically polarized teams engage in longer, more constructive and competitive conversations. These exchanges were more substantially focused than those of homogeneous groups but at the same time had a greater degree of lexical diversity. This kind of study suggests that even when there is great ideological polarization, when people work together on a common goal, growth can be achieved. In line with the idea of the process of free speech being a public good, these ideologically polarized teams engage in a meaningful communication situation with the idea that they are contributing to the common good. Contrary to situations in which ideologically opposed people are reluctant to engage with people with opposing views, recoil within echo-chambers or only interact in a vitriolic manner with people of different views, collaboration for the common goal of producing reliable public information proved to be a way of promoting

constructive interaction amongst ideologically opposed people. According to the study, it was precisely political views that motivated people to maintain their participation even if that meant uncomfortable confrontations. Wikipedia's policies and guidelines contributed to successful collaboration between seasoned users. Guidelines were so frequently evoked by users that a nomenclature for them was developed such as for "Neutral Point of View Policy" ("NPOV"), encouragements to use citation ("CITE"), and to avoid conflict of interests ("COI").

The researchers suggest that institutional designs should not only seek to have a high number of experts but they should also promote and even impose cooperation from a politically diverse pool.

Conclusion

This dissertation was an attempt to think through how we "know" ourselves and seek legitimate collective action in the digital age in order to inform educational endeavors in our times. For this, I first identified the question of knowing ourselves as one related to democracy, and located it in the American context by discussing Dewey's political philosophy which was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and reflected the conditions of his time. With the objective of finding an approach to democracy that still sought to retain the centrality of its epistemic aspect but that was closer to how modern institutions function, I turned to Habermas' theory of communicative action and Mouffe's agonistic politics. Evaluating these two theories against the backdrop of the contemporary networked media landscape, I suggested that their approaches presupposed democratic subjects that are too abstracted from everyday

realities of embodied existence and are too centered on interactions that occur at the level of political institutions. I therefore called for a transindividual view of the democratic subject as conceptualized by Spinoza and advocated for Balibar's conception of the process of freedom of speech as a public good. I ended the dissertation by putting Balibar and Dewey's conceptions of communication side-by-side in order to develop a philosophy of education that is based on a philanthropic form of sociality for the digital age.

Going forward, thinking about education in times of global man-made environmental degradation may be fruitfully nourished by Spinoza's anti-individualist and non-dualist philosophy. His doctrine of the *conatus*, as the desire of self-preservation that acts as an organizing force for beings that are in perpetual constitution through their encounters, invites us to think of human action and expression, not as spontaneous to individuals, but as embedded in complex webs of causality. In a world that has become increasingly interdependent, knowledges that might be crucial for our collective self-preservation may emerge from unsuspected places. Within a globalized economy in which people are differently affected by their positioning within transnational fluxes and supply chains, thinking in terms of Spinoza's philanthropic ethics may help us see how we might seek assemblages that are more conducive both to the flourishing of all humans and to a sustainable planet. After all, the desire for self-preservation also pertains to the ensemble of beings, and it is in everyone's interest "align" their own desires to work for better assemblages. Below I give an example of a setting that has personal relevance to me but that is also linked to global dynamics for which thinking in Spinoza's non-dualist and transindividual terms might help us think of education in our times:

Currently, in the region that is south of Cali, the city where I grew up in Colombia, indigenous groups, afro-descendants and educators are blocking the road between the city and the south of the country organized as a “Minga”.⁵ They are calling for the central government to comply with agreements made in the past regarding rural development as well as for protection from violence against their communities. What connects the plights of these minorities to larger, transnational fluxes and issues of global significance is that this region is a site in which two highly contaminating and conflict-producing internationally demanded products are sourced and processed: gold⁶ and coca – which is both cultivated and processed into cocaine in the region⁷. While both gold mining and coca cultivation have been traditional activities through which minorities in the region have ensured their livelihood and traditions, the incursion of actors involved in the transnational trade has resulted in confrontations between these minorities – both indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities – and those involved in the transnational trades. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian community leaders and environmental activists are being assassinated at alarming rates. Where I see the potential of Spinoza’s philosophy in this kind of situation is in attempting to understand how these forms of resistance emerge, how they become articulated within larger movements and institutions, in short, how these assemblages “learn” from past experiences and from each other. These minorities are now articulating their demands

⁵ A “minga” is a meeting common to indigenous groups in the Andes region. It is a collective effort that is convoked with the goal of achieving a common goal. Whenever there is a minga, the minga has priority over all other activities for the community.

⁶ Illegal gold mining often uses mercury which pollutes rivers and is highly toxic to those exposed to it.

⁷ Cocaine, as it is a processed product with a growing demand leads to severe deforestation and its processing requires the use of chemicals that have devastating effects on soils, biodiversity and hydrology. These effects are not only felt by surrounding communities but are devastating for the environment in general.

for rights not only to the Colombian government but also keeping in mind that they have a national and to a certain extent a global audience. The pronouncements by the leaders of the group are particularly eloquent, and it is clear that the organizing strategies are the result of a long learning process that has also benefited from networked forms of communication. There is a long tradition in Latin American scholarship of viewing education as something political and not just pedagogical (Freire, 2005), and the pedagogical dimension of social movements has been explored by several Latin American theorists such as De Sousa Santos (2010) and Zibechi (2007). Taking a Spinozan approach which sees alterity as an opportunity for enrichment, seeking fruitful encounters between Spinoza's thought – which is considered to go “against the grain” of Western philosophy – and these Latin American traditions might yield refreshing perspectives.

I conclude this dissertation by returning to Balibar's concept of the process of freedom of speech as public good. As this project comes full circle, an inquiry that started from questions arisen from a situated experience seeks to find its place within larger discussions, to be a tiny part of that process that makes us all freer. As with any purposeful human endeavor, the finished product of our work may or may not achieve the level of meaningful communication that Dewey considers conducive to growth. It may just be, that among the countless encounters with people, texts and environments that took place during the process, there were more generative and meaningful interactions than the ones that result from the finished product. These interactions might have established more “adequate” compositions between us or within ourselves. The task of struggling through circumstances, drives, feelings and thoughts in order to offer unique

perspectives is what striving to know ourselves as individuals and collectives entails.

This still stands in our times of seemingly incessant digital recompositions. In times of globalization and increased polarization, thinking of the process of free speech as a public good compels us to give space to experimentation, wonder, undecidability, indeterminateness, process, and to communicate with the gentleness that dwells in all of us.

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Appendix

Citation Guide for Spinoza's *Ethics*I. The Formal Structure of Spinoza's *Ethics* (adapted from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy):

The *Ethics* is broken into five parts:

1. Of God
2. Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind
3. Of the Origin and Nature of the Affects
4. Of Human Bondage, or the Power of the Affects
5. Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom

Part I concerns issues in general metaphysics (the existence of God, free will, the nature of bodies and minds, etc.) Part II concerns two issues related to the mind: (i) what the mind is and how it relates to the body, and (ii) a general theory of knowledge. In Part III, Spinoza presents his theory of emotions (which he calls “affects”) and a fully deterministic human psychology. In Parts IV and V, Spinoza presents his ethical theory. Each part of the *Ethics* is broken into *definitions* of key terms, *axioms* (assumptions), *propositions* (theorems proven on the basis of the definitions, axioms, and the previous propositions), *demonstrations* (proofs), *corollaries* (where Spinoza often draws attention to other claims which can be proven on the basis of his propositions, but which are not part of his main argument), and *scholia* (where Spinoza breaks out of his rigorous structure to comment, argue, or restate the demonstrated material in a more easily accessible way.)

To this classic geometrical structure, Spinoza adds three additions to the *Ethics*. (1) Spinoza ends Parts I and IV with appendices. In these appendices he comments on the previous part, clarifies his position, and adds new arguments. (2) In Part II and after proposition 13, Spinoza interrupts his argument to include a short discussion on physics and the laws of motion. This part of the *Ethics* is sometimes called the “Physical Digression,” “Physical Interlude,” or the “Short Treatise on Bodies.” (3) At the end of Part III Spinoza includes an organized list of the definition of the affects (emotions) as argued for in Part III.

II. List of abbreviations:

Throughout this dissertation the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza’s writings have been used:

E – Ethics

App – Appendix

Ax – Axiom

C – Corollary

Def – Definition

D – Demonstration

Lem – Lemma

P – Proposition

Post – Postulate

Pref – Preface

S – Scholium