Polarization and Education for Democratic Survival

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Maya Holden Cohen provides a timely and compelling critique of *political polarization* as a primary pedagogical frame for addressing political conflicts and especially for understanding their causes.[1] I trust (as I must) Cohen's assertions that this framing is widely used in classrooms. And I agree that, as characterized, such a frame is "inadequate to the demands of civic education in a time of democratic vulnerability." In what follows, I suggest several points that are intended to both bolster and critically enhance Cohen's argument. First, I attempt to qualify and complicate polarization as a descriptive/empirical framing of political conflict. Second, I appeal to a conception of democratic conflict as *agonistic pluralism* to argue that what students must ultimately understand about polarization is that the phenomenon itself is not as important as how we interpret it. Our myriad differences do not matter so much as what "we, the People" choose to make of them. Finally, I suggest that while this analysis is, as I said at the outset, timely, it is also too late. As democratic fragility becomes democratic emergency, the question of what civic education demands itself requires a new and more expansive frame, one that goes far beyond the classroom, the school, the young, and the future.

POLARIZATION: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Cohen cites popular visual representations created by the Pew Research Center to illustrate growing partisan polarization over time (for example, from 1994-2017). The power of an interpretive frame depends on its facility in simplifying complex phenomena using an easy-to-grasp

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metaphor or master principle. The metaphor or principle implied by Pew's polarization graphics is, according to Cohen, that "our core political problem is distance . . . thus implying that the solution is to 'come together' both socially and politically."

It is useful here to separate, and keep apart for a space, ideological and affective polarization. Regarding the first, it is safe to say that most who study ideological polarization in the US do not believe this has increased as dramatically as these Pew diagrams suggest. Political scientists Matt Burgess and Renae Marshall, for example, point out that if a party platform was created based on what a super-majority of Americans prefer, then it could include:

> a $15 minimum wage (67 percent), higher infrastructure spending (75 percent), more k-12 funding (76 percent), allowing the government to negotiate drug prices (75 percent . . .), providing healthcare to veterans at all Medicare-receiving providers (91 percent) . . . limiting campaign spending (77 percent), and a constitutional amendment guaranteeing equal rights independent of sex (70 percent).[2]

Indeed, this is a small selection of the many substantial policy issues Burgess and Marshall include in their list. One of the more obvious liabilities of the polarization frame is that its master metaphor of growing distance obscures the fact that *across* partisan divides there is greater agreement on policy issues than in times past.

Educators might find a more nuanced and useful description of US political beliefs and identification in the findings of Hawkins, et al.[3] This study draws upon survey and other statistical data to distinguish seven distinct American "Tribes," named here with their proportion in the population: Progressive Activists (8 percent), Traditional Liberals

(11 percent), Passive Liberals (15 percent), Politically Disengaged (26 percent), Moderates (15 percent), Traditional Conservative (19 percent), and Devoted Conservative (6 percent).

The study finds a disproportionate influence on media characterizations of political difference exerted by two categories in the "Wings" on the right (Traditional and Devoted Conservative, 25 percent) and one on the left (Progressive Activist, 8 percent). The other four categories around the "center" constitute the "Exhausted Majority" (67 percent). What might classroom discussions based on this more empirically adequate picture of America's "Hidden Tribes" lead to, as compared to the binary, polar world presented in the Pew graphics that Cohen cites? The key point for our purposes is that the polarization frame typically overstates ideological difference and gives a distorting influence to the relatively small minority in the "Wings," thereby contributing to the exhaustion of the majority that still clusters around the ideological center.

To note that by the most defensible metrics ideological polarization has not actually increased over the past several decades is not to say (as the polarization frame would have it) that this is a good thing. In fact, some empirical research indicates that ideological polarization is often good for democracy.[4] In societies with little ideological divergence, there is also little motivation to participate in politics (and a larger group of what Hawkins, et al. label the "Politically Disengaged"). The strategy of voter mobilization, so central to our electoral politics, relies upon this positive correlation between the sense that every political decision is about distinct and competing forces, some of which one identifies with (more or less) and others one rejects and perhaps even fears. Political scientists sympathetic to deliberative and participatory conceptions of democracy, therefore, have over the years interpreted polarization as an important feature of democratic revitalization. This all reinforces Cohen's argument

doi: 10.47925/78.1.093

that ideological polarization is not in itself a threat to democracy. It suggests we might go further, valuing such divergence and diversity as a precondition and potentially a boon to democratic engagement.

Affective polarization is another matter. Cohen defines this as "strong negative feelings about political opponents." Some scholars have argued that ideological polarization is the root of growing affective polarization.[5] Cohen writes that, on this view, "As . . . differences increasingly stacked up along party lines, partisan dislike and distrust grew." But this is controversial, especially in light of the evidence mentioned above that ideological polarization has increased much less than most believe. The causal chain may work in the opposite direction, with affective factors underwriting motivated reasoning in the direction of certain ideological beliefs. Regardless, this assumption that different ideas and identities lead to negative feelings and attitudes is a key part of the polarization pedagogical frame.

It is true that by 2016, more than 40 percent of party-affiliates identified the other party as a threat to the nation's wellbeing. This is something new, in that disagreement is no longer perceived as a struggle among political equals as to what is best for *us*. Rather, the other party is perceived as an existential threat to the polity itself. While ideological polarization can be good, affective polarization is much more likely to be bad. It can undermine respect for others as civic equals and, if it grows strong enough, become "toxic" or "pernicious" polarization. This form of polarization, which both arises from and reinforces a sense of political struggle, is literally a kind of war—a struggle in which preservation of oneself requires domination or expulsion of the other. If unabated, pernicious polarization transforms debate over differences among civic equals into trial by combat. And this may be the polity's undoing.

POLITICAL STRUGGLE: AGONISTIC OR ANTAGONISTIC?

Conceptually, this dangerous form of polarization is best understood not as a continuous variable, a matter of degree or gradation, but rather as a discrete variable whose values differ not in degree but in kind. This is the insight that political theorist Chantal Mouffe puts forward in her book *The Democratic Paradox*.[6] Mouffe contests the depolarization of the public sphere that she identifies with the so-called "Third Way" politics of the 1990s. She argues that depolarization amounts to an evasion of politics and that a nominally apolitical yet hegemonic "centrism" effectively closes down the forum as a site of struggle, thus denying citizens any opportunity to seek redress for grievances or to advance their interests.

Mouffe maintains, on the contrary, that disagreement and struggle are essential features of democracy. Democratic struggle is, however, distinguished from other forms. It occurs within commitment to civic equality and a basic framework of shared rights and responsibilities. Democrats struggle to prevail over their opponents but not to vanquish them through expulsion, subjugation, or murder. Mouffe's term for such conflict is *agonistic pluralism.* "Envisaged from the point of view of 'agonistic pluralism,'" Mouffe writes, "the aim of democratic politics is to construct the 'them' in such a way that it is no longer an enemy to be destroyed, but as an 'adversary,' someone whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question . . . *Antagonism* is the struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is the struggle between adversaries."[7]

One way to understand our present crisis of democracy is that, while ideological polarization has not actually changed, the *interpretation* of political differences has.[8] It is not the existence of differences but what people make of them that matters. The dangerous shift, which is reflected in measures of affective polarization, is a matter of kind, not of degree: from agonistic pluralism to antagonistic struggle for survival and/

or supremacy. The degree of difference is not the issue. What matters is whether those who differ regard one another as fellow citizens with an equal right to press their claims and pursue their aims. Polarization dynamics of the kind visualized by the Pew Research Center may very well serve as a starting point for classroom conversations. But one important landing place for such discussion is an appreciation of the importance of civic friendship, of respect and equality that can hold a democratic community together. Students should think through the basic commitments that make our world and our institutions "safe" for struggle and what kind of institutions and attitudes enable us fight with all our might over things that matter without tearing each other and ourselves apart.

CONCLUSION—THE CIVIC EDUCATION WE NEED

In conclusion, I would like to point out that all of this is not enough. Cohen's paper is on point, and its contribution is constructive. But its approach to the question is embedded in scholarly practices that feel, to me at least, increasingly out of sync with the moment. Our crisis of democracy is *now*. An improved theory of civic education in schools will not make the difference that we need. Addressing antagonistic polarization and democratic vulnerability through a better approach to schooling is like making up for banned Russian energy imports by issuing new leases for domestic drilling. The threat is *today*, but the strategy is aimed at safety *tomorrow*. It would behoove all democratically committed scholars and practitioners to begin asking different questions, better calibrated to the urgency of the moment, and to attempt answers in new ways. What will it take to turn antagonistic "culture war" battles that increasingly target teachers, administrators, and the most vulnerable students into agonistic struggle in the service of an inclusive and common good? There are precedents—in movements for schools as community centers, the survival schools of Black and Indigenous liberation, and the adult education movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this is no simple thing, it is also imperative—for "what this political moment requires" is a civic education that is not for students alone but for all of us.

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1 Maya Holden Cohen, "'What Is It That's Going On Here?': Frames for Teaching American Political Conflict in Divided Times," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (same issue).

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3 Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres, and Tom Dixon, "Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape," *More in Common*, 2018. https://hiddentribes.us/.

4 Jennifer Wolak and Anand Sokey, "Enraged and Engaged? Emotions as Motives for Discussion Politics" *American Politics Research* (forthcoming); Michael MacKuen et al., "Civic Engagements: Resolute Partisanship or Reflective Deliberation," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 2 (2010): 440-458.

5 Steven W. Webster and Alan I. Abromowitz, "The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization in the U.S. Electorate," *American Politics Research* 45, no. 4 (2017): 621-647.

6 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2005).

7 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 102.

8 Matt Burgess and Renai Marshall, "What if a Presidential Candidate Ran on What Most Americans Actually Wanted?"

doi: 10.47925/78.1.093