

Can There Be Pluralism Without Conflict?

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One of the dreams of education is to create conditions for more peaceful forms of coexistence across human divisiveness — a dream that has shaped efforts in intercultural, multicultural, and cosmopolitan educational projects alike. Such maneuvers regularly cast pluralism in terms of “diversity,” “multiplicity,” and “difference,” and largely claim that the “recognition” of identities, achieved most often through dialogue, constitutes the political hope for developing a more inclusive democracy. In this sense, democracy is seen to be pluralist in its intent to account for the wide variety of cultural traditions, ethnic groupings, linguistic communities, and religious beliefs in human society. By ingesting these, so to speak, into democratic processes, the hope is that we better nourish the body politic. But are the terms by which we often identify such variation adequate to facing the question of human pluralism and what pluralism means for democracy? And is it the case that dialogue across such variation — and the recognition to which this supposedly leads — are the optimal ways of promoting democratic possibility and dealing with conflict?

I want to spend some time here on reworking what pluralism can signify for democratic education by challenging the presupposition that human pluralism can be captured through our appeals to cultural diversity, a politics of difference, or a multiplicity of perspectives alone. Moreover, I flesh out in some detail why it is impossible to speak of pluralism without having a related idea of how conflict emerges in the heterogeneous spaces of human social life, as radical democratic theorist Chantal Mouffe claims so forcefully.¹ Taking pluralism seriously means reframing democracy in terms that move away from recognition and dialogue toward seeing it as an unending project of dissent and contestation.² I propose, following Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, that pluralism is not simply about social attributes or identities; pluralism is also an indelible aspect of the emergence of subjectivity itself as a being-with others. I then expand this view, drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, in order to highlight the conflictual nature of such emergence. I argue that, by conceiving of pluralism more radically on these grounds, we are better able to grasp how conflict and contestation are not merely incidental to human plurality, nor are they mere expressions of the failure of recognition or dialogue; instead, they are inevitable consequences of the deep separation and nonexchangeability of subjective existence. Seeing pluralism in these terms, then, puts the question of how to advocate for democratic possibility into sharp relief. For as I suggest further below, to think we can simply “ingest” pluralism in order to overcome conflict is like wanting to have one’s cake and eat it too. The point to be made is that the cake is indigestible and we need to transform our eating habits to allay the pangs of our democratic hunger.

THE SUBJECT IN PLURAL AND THE EMERGENCE OF CONFLICT IN EDUCATION

When we speak of human pluralism, to what exactly are we referring? Are we making a rather banal claim that there is more than one human in the world, or that there is more than one perspective and worldview that humans hold? (Call this the mathematical view.) Or are we proposing a system for handling the manifestations of our different interests, beliefs, traditions, values, and ethnic belonging? (Call this the social view.) Or are we suggesting that multiplicity derives from the seemingly infinite play of language that constitutes manifold subjectivities and a divided sense of self? (Call this the discursive view.) Or are we signaling that the human is itself a multiplicity, in which each unique subject comes into existence only in the moment of being with others? (Call this, finally, the radical ontological view.)

Generally speaking, the received view of pluralism in education — particularly in those educational agendas that focus on cosmopolitanism, antiracism, feminism, multiculturalism, and interculturalism — has been for some time now derived mostly from the social view. Pluralism is thus seen as evidence of the ways in which we are shaped by the customs, traditions, and values that we largely inherit from the communities within which we find ourselves. Diversity is hence mainly depicted in a social register and individuals are seen to be different from one another because of the integral relation they have to their social and cultural environments. Thus the democratic question is routed along a sociological path; the language most often used here focuses on identity, difference, and community, and how these elements might find expression in democratic spaces. Democracy aims toward inclusivity and processes of engaging diversity through practices of dialogue and discussion.³ On this account, conflict arises out of a variety of sources, such as values, worldviews, moral practices, and perspectives that are seen to be linked to one's social positioning; the prime means through which conflict appears has to do with misunderstanding, lack of empathy, and the nonrational elements in our apprehension of other cultures. Conflict, in short, is viewed as inhering in that space of encounter between cultures.

Yet there also has been some shift in education toward a poststructural view of pluralism as the discursive constitution of subjectivity. Here it is language that plays a foremost role in the formation of subjects whose opportunities for democratic participation are both enabled and limited by the discourses currently in circulation. Identities are not constructed in relation to fixed notions of culture or other social groupings, but along the lines of practices and enunciative strategies through which certain identities are constituted. Identities in this view are performative and irreducible to any direct social prescription or notion of belonging in a given community.⁴ Pluralism thus appears as a series of seemingly infinite possibilities of how subjectivities enact, stage, and articulate themselves through various acts of signification. Conflict thereby emerges not in relation to the variation of values or perspectives that reside in cultural communities, but in the variety of discourses and interactive practices that make competing claims on the subject. Thus conflict materializes neither through misunderstanding nor lack of empathy, but is instead rooted in the very ways in which subjectivity is negotiated — resolving conflict

becomes a question of intelligibility across different discourses. This struggle for intelligibility, then, provides one of the key ways in which democracy can be reformulated, not as a process of dialogue that seeks understanding, but as an open-ended practice of negotiation through which articulations offer transformative potential.

Admittedly, these are broad brushstrokes with which I have painted the social and the discursive views of pluralism in education. Although, as will become clear below, my own excursion into the idea of pluralism lies much closer to the latter discursive view than to the former social one, I nonetheless want to develop further the point that pluralism itself is what makes interaction between subjects possible, and the attachments that subjects make to one another (as well as to various discourses) are only possible if we accept the fundamental point that a subject is radically unique at the same time as it is constituted through exposure to and disruption by what lies outside of it. I claim here that it is the very exteriority of my own emergent subjectivity that predisposes me to conflict from the start of subject formation *at the same time* as it opens up the very possibility for rethinking the terms of democratic engagement of conflict. It is this position — what I call the radical ontological position — that I flesh out here, first by focusing on the question of what being with others entails and secondly through an investigation into the inherently conflictual and, indeed, traumatic character of such being.

BEING WITH OTHERS: ARENDT AND NANCY

Hannah Arendt, perhaps more than any other philosopher, has made pluralism a central part of our political vocabulary. Pluralism on Arendt's view is neither merely a mathematical nor a social aspect of existence, but is part of the human condition. One of her starting points is, not surprisingly, Martin Heidegger's *Mitsein*, or being-in-the-world with others. She uses this notion, in fact, to critique the limitations of Heidegger's privileging of *Dasein* and insists that existence cannot be abstracted from coexistence. She situates this being-in-the world as an inescapable aspect of natality — we are born into an already populated realm through which action and speech are founded.

If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.⁵

Speech and action are only possible, on Arendtian terms, because there are others with whom I coexist; speech and action are dependent upon this preliminary “social” aspect. But more radical than this is that although natality is part of the human condition, there is no attributable identity prior to the enactment of speech and action. For Arendt, plurality is a necessary condition for the very *appearance* and *revelation* of our self-existence, which is always singular and unique: “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them — that is, in sheer human togetherness.”⁶ This manifestation of the human subject occurs through the accounts we give of ourselves and the accounts of the world we give to others. There is a nominal aspect, then, to

our speech that defines the interests — the *inter-est* — of what lies between people; speech and action are eminently concerned with this in-between, “so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent.”⁷ Yet the truly radical point that Arendt makes is that the individual does not simply generate herself *ex nihilo*; neither is the individual a proper owner of the words she utters or the deeds she commits.

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.⁸

Arendt insists that the distinctness of individuals only makes its appearance through a speech (and action) that is located in the space in-between people. For her, “human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”⁹ In focusing on action and speech, Arendt locates the emergence of the singular individual within the sphere of appearances, which she views as fundamentally political.

From a slightly different position, Jean-Luc Nancy sees his task as uncovering the ways that being *with* others become *instances* or *events* where the singularity of the subject appears. So it is not via our togetherness that I emerge as distinct. I emerge as distinct only as a “being one with others.”¹⁰ Thus, in subtle distinction from Arendt, although in evident conversation with her via Heidegger, Nancy posits that the very possibility of operating in the space in-between people is due not only to the plurality of the world, but also to the radical difference that separates subjects themselves.

In his book *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy emphasizes that what is crucial for philosophical examination is the idea that “everything...passes *between us*” (*BSP*, 5, emphasis in original). This in-between is not so much about what we have in common, but is that which underscores our distance and separation: “there is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up” (*Ibid.*). It is the very togetherness across the differences between us that constitutes being itself. He writes: “The one/other is neither ‘by,’ nor ‘for,’ nor ‘in,’ nor ‘despite,’ but rather ‘with’” (*BSP*, 34). This “with” is not reducible to a particular kind of relation or bond; rather, Nancy’s emphasis lies in viewing existence itself as that which is always already plural, what he calls the “singular plural.”

The “singular plural” is a term used to highlight how all existence is coexistence, a sharing of time and space with others. That is, a subject is singular only as a reflection of its participation in an encounter with others, in human plurality. Echoing Arendt’s emphasis on natality, Nancy writes: “Nothing and nobody can be born without being born to and with others who come into this encounter, who are born in their own turn. The ‘together,’ therefore, is an absolutely originary structure” (*BSP*, 61). This is not to suggest that existences are all the same; rather they are singular and unique for they “present the here and now” as both singular event *and* as shared time-space. Unlike the idea of an individual whose existence occurs against a *backdrop* of plurality (for example, a person whose experiences of the

social world she lives in “shape” her existence), Nancy, like Arendt, sees plurality as the condition of existence itself, and sees each instant in which one communicates, acts, touches, or simply is as a singular, unique expression of that plurality. He writes, “‘One’ is not ‘with’ in some general sort of way, but each time according to determined modes that are themselves multiple and simultaneous” (*BSP*, 65). We “come to presence,” as he puts it, only in being *with* others in which that coming is unique by virtue of the here and now in which it occurs. There is no “one” without the “with” that acts as the horizon of possibility in which the “one” can be (*BSP*, 33).

What this means is that relations are not about “overcoming” differences, but about the singularity present in a shared world. In this sense, it is important to highlight that Nancy’s vision of “being singular plural” is not about describing or capturing social or sociological phenomena as fundamental to our being. He is not claiming that we are social beings or that being can be reduced to socially constructed identities. He instead poses real challenges to thinking through what it might mean to consider that the meaning of existence itself lies in neither our individual nor collective bodies, but in the space of the “with” that allows for singular subjects to emerge.

In establishing the importance of being with others as a radical condition for pluralism, I have thus far made two claims: first, that being-in-the-world is not simply a mathematical statement, nor is it a sociological one, but is itself a claim to the manifold landscape of existence itself; and, secondly, that radical singularity is a central feature of any consideration of pluralism. This means that pluralism is about the *particular* ways that multiplicity is enacted through each singular utterance, action, and expression. Thus the event of being-with, an event that occurs in the present, can never be replicated, for it resists generalization even as it marks the plural conditions of its possibility. In what ways, though, does this event of being one with others, of being in the world with others as a particular instance of human plurality, actually contribute to rethinking the conflicts usually attributed to pluralism? Or, to put it another way, how might it contribute to a new understanding of conflict itself?

Given the seemingly infinite number of permutations possible for existence (that is, the vast heterogeneity of being unique and being with others), it would not be too much of a stretch to see where the possibilities for conflict can emerge. Yet I do think that conflict is not merely a mathematical problem, but one linked to the nature of the way in which our coming to presence as a singularly plural enactment is also tied to a story of our own trauma in coming to speech and action. Nancy claims, and I think Arendt would agree, that togetherness is originary. And I think this is a thought worth holding on to. But unless we investigate the possibility of the preoriginary possibilities of being, then we end up reasserting a rather banal sense of conflict: that is, one that either is reduced to conflicting wills and self-interest, or is solely tied to the social parameters of the communities in which we are positioned. If something of import can be gained from the view that the individual emerges through the moment of being with others, we need also to have some understanding as to the conditions that predispose that individual to act and speak in the first place.

I turn here to discuss the ways in which my susceptibility to the impingement of the world via the other constitutes that preoriginary moment — one that haunts the singular of expression of being with others.

A QUESTION OF SUSCEPTIBILITY

The traumatic story of my susceptibility to the other begins with the radical difference between one's singular existence and that of another. It is a story offered most cogently by Emmanuel Levinas and certain strands of psychoanalytic thought (here I focus on the former), and has been recently taken up and developed by Judith Butler. Levinas, for one, writes *contra* the Heideggerian emphasis on Being as a transcendental figure of existence, yet rather than turn to a reformulation of *Mitsein*, as Arendt and Nancy do, he focuses on the preoriginary moment of being in terms of disruption and displacement. He explains this “traumatic wounding” through his insistence upon a prior, preoriginary (read preontological) susceptibility I have to the call of the other, which is located in a relation of *proximity*.

Levinas depicts how the trauma ushered in by proximity is occasioned by the other's command to me; the other calls me into question by virtue of that proximal relation that reveals our closeness even as it opens up the chiasmic gulf that separates us. “Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self.”¹¹ It is here, in such proximity, that the other commands the self to respond by calling that very self into question. It does so not through a literal posing of the question, “Who are you?” but through the experience of address from which the self cannot flee.

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity.¹²

Thus the “with” or the “in-between” can be no innocent prepositional space, but harkens back to the memory of this accusation; it is a memory that cannot be captured through representation in the present, but that nonetheless exists as a trace of my founding moment as a speaking, communicative subject who is called on to respond.

Read through Levinas, then, I am bound to express myself as a form of address that is always belated with respect to what the other commands from me. The speech that is expressive of a singular plural is not simply a result of my being in the world with others, but is first structured by the other's being otherwise — a structuration that we do not overcome as one stage in development, but that continually plagues our speech and action as singular events of plurality. I am not saying that Arendt and Nancy have it totally wrong. Quite the contrary. I think that in the political realm, the appearance of the subject as simultaneously unique and inevitability tied to being with others makes eminent sense. Yet what their theories miss is that the very predisposition to my speaking is born from the susceptibility I have to the other's address, which in turn is an address that is experienced as a persecution. Such persecutory power traumatizes even as it compels me to speech. If the other did not disrupt, disturb and decenter me, “I,” in other words, could not exist, could not speak,

and could not be “with.” Judith Butler, in exploring these same conditions of susceptibility for the moral subject, writes: “none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other’s hands, at each other’s mercy.”¹³ For her, Levinas “is not saying that primary relations are abusive and terrible; he is simply saying that at the most primary level we are acted upon by others in ways over which we have no say, and that this passivity, susceptibility, and condition of *being impinged upon* inaugurate who we are.”¹⁴ It is this susceptibility and consequent wounding that, to my mind, gives us a base from which to understand the relation between conflict and pluralism. For, paradoxically, without this sense of impingement and experience of persecution I have no way of being “one” with “others.”

PLURALISM, CONFLICT, AND EDUCATION, OR LIVING WITH THE INDIGESTIBLE

There are thus two central elements in the view of pluralism as a radical ontology that I have outlined here. The first is the event of singularity that occurs as an expression of multiplicity. This, I have argued, presents us with a model of the ways in which heterogeneity manifests itself in everyday life (understood through Nancy) and through spaces of appearance that are political in nature (understood through Arendt); togetherness on both Nancy’s and Arendt’s accounts is originary. The second central element, however, concerns the “preoriginal” trauma involved in the constitution of the I through an exterior relation to an other who impinges upon me. It is a beginning that has no beginning, an an-archy we cannot narrate into existence, but one which nonetheless informs our existence and the speech and actions through which that existence appears. The persecution of “me” by this exteriority and my susceptibility to such attack set into motion the possibility of my speech as a response to the other.

This means that “conflict” can be viewed in terms of that preoriginal exposure to the other that continues to invade my speech as a singular plural — for it is the very condition of my being with others. This would seem to be “trumping” Nancy’s and Arendt’s claims of the primacy of the “with” in the coming to presence of the subject. Yet, given that this coming to presence is reliant on speech (and action), the “with” runs the risk of inscribing this original togetherness on naive terms. By turning to a preoriginal story of trauma in which my entry into speech is already a response to a conflict, we can better understand, I think, the conflictual nature of the subject’s appearance.

Thus coexistence, from the “beginning,” so to speak, is marked by a wound — a wound which I think is never fully healed by our entry into speech and action with others. The speaking and acting subject bears this wound into the encounters that comprise the togetherness that makes being possible. In this light, it is the attachments we make to this wound through language and action that inform my being with others. This view of pluralism, then, understands conflict as part and parcel of the very constitution of subjectivity itself. Conflict does not emerge in the field of the social merely out of different values, interests, and perspectives — these are mere effects, or symptoms, if you will, of the kind of attachments we make to the conflictual aspects of facing radical singularity in all its plurality. By this I mean that

the fear, the hatred, and the indifference that one shows to others are tied to the traumatic displacement of the subject (and cannot be explained by any ordinary togetherness). That these fears and hatreds become supported by social and discursive strategies of discrimination, intolerance, and violence merely makes it easier for such displacement to find social and political outlets.

But what are we to do with this claim that pluralism necessarily involves conflict? Are educational strategies of ingestion actually amenable to the task of facing such conflict? As Chantal Mouffe has argued, the point, from a democratic view, is to offer alternative sources of identification through which political subjects can turn their antagonistic forms of conflict into legitimate, agonistic ones.¹⁵ For Mouffe, it is only by seeing certain forms of conflict as central to democracy that we can actually find ways of dealing with it beyond the usual desire simply to erase it. Such points of identification occur of course around new forms of signification that seek to rechannel the affective dimensions of the views we hold. Although I am largely in agreement with such a strategy, is there a way in which, because of the wounds we bear, democracy can also be about learning to live better with our own displacement on political terms? Education would not be an exercise in dialogic practice across social differences, but it would be rethought as an approach to political being (as a being together with others) which necessitates a serious engagement with the radical, preoriginary conditions of conflict. That is, the connection between education and democracy would require new terms of reference and new vocabularies for designating the link between our susceptibility and the democratic project.

In answer to the question posed in the title to this essay: no, there can be no pluralism without conflict. The recognition of pluralism per se cannot therefore be posited as the response to conflict on the way to a more inclusive democracy, but is the condition upon which all hopes for democracy nonetheless rest. Fraught as it is with conflict, pluralism is therefore not so easily digested. Seen in this light, multicultural, cosmopolitan, and intercultural educational projects need to wrestle instead with the indigestible elements of pluralism, and perhaps see that tensions and conflicts constitute the rough fiber of living together with others. The point is how to create a healthy democratic body that seeks not to remove fiber from its diet, but instead takes it seriously as part of its normal, if at times difficult, functioning.

1. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

2. For a discussion of this in the educational context, see Sharon Todd and Carl Anders Säfström, "Democracy, Education, and Conflict: Rethinking Respect and the Place of the Ethical," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal>.

3. See Tomas Englund, "Deliberative Communication: A Pragmatist Proposal," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38, no. 5 (2006): 503–520.

4. See Deborah Youdell, "Subjectivation and Performative Politics — Butler Thinking Althusser and Foucault: Intelligibility, Agency, and the Raced-Nationed-Religioned Subjects of Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no. 4 (2006): 511–528.

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Anchor, 1959), 158.

6. Ibid., 160.
7. Ibid., 162.
8. Ibid., 164.
9. Ibid., 156.
10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21. This text will be cited as *BSP* in the text for all subsequent references. For a discussion of the implications of Nancy's thought for politics, see Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (London: Verso, 1999), 239–253.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 46.
12. Ibid., 15.
13. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 101.
14. Ibid., 90.
15. See Mouffe, *On the Political*, especially 25–29.