
Tracking the Civic Subject in the Media Landscape: Versions of the Democratic Ideal

Television & New Media
14(1) 71–88
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1527476412458809
<http://tvnm.sagepub.com>



Peter Dahlgren¹

Abstract

Research on media and democracy mobilizes a range of conceptual versions of the subject. This is often done implicitly, or out of habit, with a specific model becoming established in any given research tradition. This presentation argues that different theories of the subject can have different implications for our understanding of citizenship and democracy. The text surveys a number of versions, deriving from a large and heterogeneous literature, and organizes them under the themes of rationalism, reflexivity, transparency, and contingency. No one version is offered as the ultimate one, since all have something to offer and at the same time have their limitations. However, it is suggested that greater awareness should be put on how we conceptualize the civic subject in our research, no least in regard to issues having to do with affect, the limits of reflexivity and self-transparency, the role of the unconscious, and the importance of contingency.

Keywords

civic subject, theories of subject, theories of self, media, democracy

Introduction: The Elusive Self

The five insightful articles above all address, in various ways, how the media contribute to the political life of democracies—even in cases where the contents are not explicitly journalistic. The authors show how the media establish certain patterns that address citizens in different ways, as well as providing resources for citizenship, that

¹Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Peter Dahlgren, Department of Communication and Media, Lund University, Box 201 221 00,
Lund, Sweden
Email: Peter.Dahlgren@kom.lu.se

is, civic cultures, and demonstrate how these can be useful to varying degrees. Furthermore, some of the texts also show how citizens respond to media representations, in research settings but also in the media, thereby publically enacting citizenship and further contributing—in good and less good ways, to civic cultures. I am pleased that some of the authors found my work on civic cultures to be a useful analytic referent, and also that they could develop some of the (no doubt many) aspects in that model that require more precision. However, in my discussion here, I want to turn my attention to another topic that these texts evoke, albeit in a rather latent manner.

The articles here as in so much of the research on media and citizenship, are working with implicit models and assumptions about how people—in their role as citizens and/or media audiences/users—actually function. In other words, what is operative in just about all such research are implicit notions about the subject-as-citizen, or the civic subject. The civic subject is at bottom the human being acting in political contexts, and from the standpoint of theory, humans have proven themselves to be rather slippery creatures who (perhaps fortunately) continue to resist neat and total theoretical enclosures. Yet I feel it can be illuminating to turn the spotlight on this topic, to invite reflection on various models or tendencies that are operative, even if implicitly. This is not to suggest that any one version is *a priori* better than others (though I can say at the outset I do not find the behavioristic tradition to be very helpful), but rather that different trajectories have different implications, focus our attention on different features of the civic subject.

The question of how we can best describe and characterize the human being found its first answers in the misty origins of religion. At later points in human history, philosophy began grappling with what came to be called the subject, and in more recent intellectual history, psychology and other behavioral and social sciences began addressing the question of subject, or the self, as it tends to be called within these traditions. The use of the notion of the subject in the context of political thought is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In English, we still have a lingering earlier usage of the term from the feudal period, though it has become muted: the idea of a “subject of the crown,” that is, one who is subordinate to a monarchical power structure.

However, as the Middle Ages waned, philosophical writings about the subject as a thinking and feeling creature gradually began to emerge, and later, as such horizons connected with the Enlightenment and the intellectual currents of the American and French revolutions, the sense of the subject as citizen, as political agent in a democratic context, gained ground. The specific attributes of this civic subject—as well as the ideal contours of democracy—were and remain contested, however, even if the debates do not always continue with sustained intensity. If more discussion today is aimed at “identity” issues, we can say that the subject is an analytic construct that signifies a more fundamental layer of the self, the basic “who” behind identity work. Yet, as we shall see, even the core of the subject is seen as a social product within some traditions.

The literature theorizing the subject is vast and spans many disciplines; even a cursory inventory would be far beyond the scope of this article (a brief, introductory effort of this kind is found in Elliott 2008). Thus, my exposition will be simplified and suggestive rather than technical and exhaustive. Based on my reading of this literature, I will focus on what I see as four definitive themes in regard to the subject that point to key decisive attributes. These themes are not always distinctly separable, but they account for much of what is at the core of this literature and will suffice to offer a rough map of some of the terrain. The themes are *rationalism*, which raises the issue of to what extent our subjectivity and our actions are steered by reason versus emotion; *reflexivity*, a concept that points to the ways that we monitor and adjust our actions in social contexts, and the consequences this has; *transparency*, the degree to which we have access to our own subjectivity and can understand ourselves; and *contingency*, the issue of to what extent we as subjects are shaped by our contexts and circumstances.

My aim here is to make visible and invite reflection on various possible notions of the subject as citizen, something that we (myself included) tend to take for granted. In thus modestly stirring up the waters and reactivating concerns about the subject, I do not intend to “resolve” anything, for in fact we will always have to deal with a multiplicity of versions and interpretations. Rather, I wish to highlight some of the possibilities available, and the articles in this issue offer an opportunity to pursue this discussion with concrete references—even if the richness of the texts and the space available to me prevent an exhaustive treatment. The articles make use of varying notions of the subject, mostly implicitly, while analyzing media genres (comedy, entertainment, and current affairs), media uses, and/or deliberative practices. Also, each of the articles connects with the political in some way, and as I will indicate, illustrates the significance of one or more of these themes on the civic subject in a compelling manner.

Rationalism: An Emotional Issue

Liberal Subjects

In every textbook on the history of philosophy, the topic of rationalism occupies a prominent place. From the ancient Greeks, to Descartes and Spinoza, and on to Kant and the Enlightenment, rationalism has rightly been lauded as a major achievement of the human mind. Basically, rationalism holds that reason is the ultimate ground of knowledge and the foundation for all forms of justification. In terms of the subject, it could be said that the attribute of rationalism is both descriptive and prescriptive: Kant argues that humans have the capacity to attain freedom by pulling themselves out of their self-imposed ignorance. They both can and should do this, and this optimism of the Enlightenment view of the subject remains with us today. Rationalism has always had its critics—Pascal and Hume, for example, argue for putting faith foremost, and

Neitzsche's various dissections of knowledge, rationalism, and their relationship to power foreshadows postmodernist and poststructural interrogation that came later. Weber, too, with his metaphors about the "iron cage," warns about rationalism's dangers. Yet rationalism's position remains well entrenched.

In traditional political theory (as well as in much mainstream economic theory), rationalism remains particularly strong and is understood as the foundation of the subject as an agent. Theories about the "rational man" (and the gender bias has had surprising longevity) has been a leitmotif of liberal thought from the start. Compared to the autocratic regimes of feudal societies, where the domination of the politically subservient subject was seen as ordained by God, rationalism was undeniably a great progressive development. Feminists have rightly countered the masculinist implication of rationalism, and aside from what remains of the gender bias, we are still left with a view of the subject that is inexorably individualistic. The ultimate social and political unit of classic liberalism is the person, and the point of his or her existence is the pursuit of self-interest, predicated on rational grounds and with the stipulation to not harm others.

Western political philosophy has not been unanimously happy with this vision, and the strict rationalism (and its concomitant individualism) of the liberal civic subject has been challenged by alternative views of citizenship. The various critiques of the liberal vision and its civic subject are not out to jettison rationalism, rather, they seek to modify its dominance by describing and prescribing a more realistic and democratically attuned version of the self (for overviews of theories of citizenship, see Isin and Turner 2003).

What many critics object to is precisely the lopsided view of the subject that is constructed in liberal political theory, where rationality is given such prominence and the affective side of human existence is systematically suppressed. This fear of the emotions has an understandable origin: people can commit dreadful acts, not least in political contexts, under the sway of emotions. However, they can also do so while acting in a rational mode (the twentieth century provides much gruesome evidence of this). Writers such as Marcus (2002) and Hall (2005) argue that rationality and emotionality are linked, always co-present within the subject, and that people would be profoundly crippled as social agents if one or the other was missing, or if the dynamic between them was ruptured. As Marcus puts it: "people are able to be rational because they are emotional; emotions enable rationality. . . . The practice of citizenship must acknowledge the role emotion plays in the development of rationality . . . the effort to exclude passion will also undermine our capacity to reason" (Marcus 2002, 7).

The critique of excessive rationalism is also directed at a theoretical trajectory different from though not unrelated to mainstream liberalism, namely the communicative action of Habermas (1984, 1987) and the tradition of deliberative democracy that is closely associated with it. Clearly, this development by Habermas and the subsequent take-off of deliberative democracy as a vision of how civic communication should proceed are major contributions to democratic thought. Yet, many voices have questioned both the feasibility and the desirability of his framework.

The basic argument is that while formally rational communication makes perfectly good sense at the decision-making level, there is concern that this can quickly become counterproductive in other settings. Obviously the public sphere degenerates when discussion becomes irrational, illogical, and nasty. Yet, conceptually locking in place a high degree of rationalism can be constrictive of political talk and expression of civic subjects, and even function as a power factor against groups less well versed in this register of communication. Also, political innovation involves new ways of framing and rendering social reality, making relevant communicative strategies such as “irony, personal narrative, aesthetic interventions, theatricality, and visibility” (Kohn 2000, 425). Similarly, Gardiner (2004) contrasts Habermas with Bakhtin, who asserts that “living discourse . . . is necessarily charged with polemical qualities, myriad evaluation and stylistic markers, and populated by diverse intentions” (Gardiner 2004, 36). Adherence to what we might characterize as a “straitjacket” of rational speech for the civic subject thus undermines the potential richness and vibrancy of political discussion in favor of an illusory ideal, and is likely to actually deflect civic engagement rather than enhance it. This is not least true in the age of Web 2.0, with all its possibilities for creative expression.

Affect and the Popular

Overly rationalist views of the subject imply a restriction on his or her modes, registers of expression, and representation. By extension, they also imply that affect, as a terrain of the psyche, is neither a site nor a resource for the political. Feminists have challenged this walling off of emotional reality already in their critique of the basic bourgeois configuration of public and private, where affect and emotions (along with women) belong to the private space of home and family (i.e., Lister 2003; Voet 1998). The civic subject is gendered, a point that is not just an ontological abstraction but has political import: gender becomes a vector for democratic politics, and issues deriving from the private and personal domains could and should always be seen as legitimate topics of potential political contention. Furthermore, this feminist intervention affords legitimacy to affect as a grounding of human experience and as a dimension of public expression.

The link to the media landscape becomes readily visible: the media obviously play an enormous, if increasingly complex and even contradictory, role in the definitions of gender, relationships, and intimacy (Gauntlett 2008; Gill 2006). Moreover, the gender theme has in recent decades given force to broader critical views that accentuate the centrality of affect and challenge the traditional view of strict separation between politics and the public, on one hand, and popular culture and the private on the other (i.e., Corner and Pels 2003; Hermes 2005; Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2005). The critics insist that even if the domains should not be collapsed into each other, there is no fixed boundary between politics and popular culture; they flow into each other, not least via the evolving genres and modes of representation in the media (see Dahlgren, 2009, for an overview of these discussions).

Popular culture offers a sense of easy access to symbolic communities, a world of belonging beyond oneself that can at times be seen as preparatory for civic engagement, prefiguring involvement beyond one's private domain. Thus, popular culture invites us to engage—with both our hearts and minds—in many questions having to do with how we should live and what kind of society we want. It allows us to process issues having to do with conflicting values, norms, and identities in a turbulent late modern sociocultural milieu. Moreover, many of the themes taken up by popular culture may seem more important and more personally relevant than the agendas on offer from mainstream politics. Finally, popular culture can serve to foster alternative conceptions of what actually constitutes politics and the political, generating reflections and engagement over other kinds of concerns and issues. In short, in this literature we find the contours of a civic subjectivity where affect and pleasure are always potential concerns of—and resources for—citizenship.

Political Feelings

That popular culture offers pleasure and that this has significance for the civic subject is taken up in several of the articles in this issue. Stephen Coleman relates it directly to journalistic formats; with the evidence he presents from the televised debates of the 2010 UK election, he tackles head-on the problematic of one-sided rationality. He counters the assumption that all affect in current affairs programming is by definition detrimental to reasoned political discourse. Underscoring that “debate on television should not be judged by the standards of the university seminar,” he argues that “television news and current affairs producers should focus upon the creation of a civic mix between the substance of political argument and the dramatic effects and affects inherent to political disagreement, conflict, and resolution.” He anchors this view in an understanding of everyday life, where “people work, relax, reflect and share ideas . . . diverse acts of civic participation take place; and subjective notions of efficacy form, evaporate and translate into a range of feelings about public life.”

From this perspective, the version of the civic self that is most coherent is precisely one where rationality and affect, reason and emotion, are in a constant interplay. The life of democracy requires that people be informed, and that they discuss and deliberate, but *also* that they be emotionally engaged, aroused to involvement, and at some point made to feel that they are sufficiently empowered to make a difference. In its best moments, television journalism can constructively address both the cognition and the feelings of the civic subject.

More Than Just Laughs

The article by Fadi Hirzalla, Liesbeth van Zoonen, and Floris Muller is a really fruitful contribution to humor as an important dimension of affect in politics generally, and as a form of civic practice more specifically. Their evidence suggests the general claim that humor is one of many possible forms of civic practice is valid, but that we

have to have a clear idea about what kind of humor is involved and its consequences. Thus, the distinctions they offer, between for example, unifying and divisive humor, is an important conceptual step. Likewise, the observation that the vlogs themselves largely did not generate an occasion for reflection, but rather triggered, and no doubt reinforced, already existing (and quite entrenched) views.

John Corner offers another step forward in our understanding of political humor in the media—and the affective side of the civic subject. He and his colleagues show us that humor, in its various forms as *imitative*, *descriptive*, or *argumentative*, can position civic subjects differently. He finds, via his respondents, that “comedic treatments can make connections with more serious, critical thinking about civic space, or they can work essentially as regular inputs of ‘fun’ against the background of . . . a distant, acquiescent or even resigned, perception of the dominant order.” Also, without suitable background political knowledge, people can feel distanced from the humor as well as discouraged from political involvement. Furthermore, humor that offers a sense of ironic distance can nourish engagement in some circumstances and justify apathy in others. Not least, we learn for example, that the category of argumentative humor, which can even be aimed at political ideas and not just persons, necessitates a degree of knowledge and political commitment on the part of the audience. Rationality and emotion remain entwined.

Reflexivity: The Monitoring Self

That people monitor their actions in order to suitably adapt them to the surrounding circumstances has always been a feature of the thinking subject. The modern concept of feedback, for example, captures this idea in regard to technical and biological systems and is also used in some branches of psychology. In the social and human sciences, the notion of reflexivity became somewhat of a buzzword in social theory in the 1990s, underscoring the process by which the individual examines and reflects on his or her life, and thereby adjusts and modifies specific practices and more overarching strategies. On the surface, all this may seem banal, but it has come to generate varying implications for how we understand the subject in the historical present. At bottom, the theme of reflexivity opens up the question of who is actually doing the monitoring, and who is being monitored.

Image Management

One modern theorist who simulated a good deal of controversy in this regard is Erving Goffman. His micro-sociology is generally not associated with the specific domain of citizenship, but it does have salience. In his first major publication (Goffman 1959), titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he shows how the self is basically a performative one. People strategically enact their identities, adapting different modes in different contexts, and they fine-hone the performances by monitoring the reactions of others. The self is thus seen as being aware of a distinction between itself and the

roles, the public identities, it uses in different settings. This is obviously a far theoretic cry from the Habermasian interlocutor, who is geared toward openness and authenticity.

Goffman (1983) does not tell us much about the deeper self behind the publicly performed identities; it remains shadowy. The most we can really say is that it seeks to express and embody itself in social enactments and encounters. Does this necessarily have to mean that we are dealing here with a con artist, a hustler, as is sometimes claimed? It seems to me that the Goffmanian agent need not be the ethical dark side of the one that Habermas and others envision, and were we to insert this subject into a context of democratic participation, it is not at all certain that this would be detrimental to such ideals. Goffman's subject can have innumerable agendas, aims, and ambitions, but he or she is decidedly committed to being a social participant. This subject is adept at the norms and moral frameworks of society, and there does not appear to be any reason to assume that he or she would break them any more than any other subject we might theoretically construct. Indeed, Goffman's subject, in his or her self-presentation, is actively involved in the construction and reproduction of society at the micro level, in ways that he implied were in fact similar to Bourdieu's perspective (Goffman 1983).

A certain moral skepticism toward the Goffmanian subject no doubt derives precisely from its explicit status as knowingly performative. This seems to smack of manipulation, and if we invoke the norms of democracy, it can readily trigger alarm bells among some who are committed to deliberation and similar orientations. And yet: the notion of performance as central to democracy has ancient origins, and in modern times it is strongly associated with the work of Hanna Arendt (see Arendt 1958). More recently, Mouffe (2005) has recast this performative notion of political participation in the theoretical horizons of radical democracy and discourse theory (which I will return to below). We have in Goffman a proto-decentered subject, one that operates with a multiplicity of identities, and one that at least need not be at odds with some version of the civic subject. Its self-monitoring, social competence, and adaptability can in fact be viewed as important assets for the sociality required for doing citizenship in specific interactive contexts of the public sphere.

Tobias Olsson and Fredrik Miegel in their article put the limelight on Dewey in regard to our hopes for democracy. I have acknowledged the importance of Dewey's work in understanding the social groundings of democratic life, but probably not realized just how much the thinking of this luminous master has made its way into—and helped shape—my own. He remains an inspirational source, not least in regard to the questions about how we learn to become citizens, as Olsson and Miegel affirm. And I would suggest that this perspective of citizenship as a process of becoming—with little shifts of the theoretical prism—resonates especially well with the theme of reflexivity. In particular, the reflexive Goffmanian social participant, skilled in the moral frameworks of his or her milieu, is active in the performative reproduction of the social order. Embedded in his or her communities, this subject becomes a democratic civic agent via face-to-face interaction—at least under the best of circumstances.

Reflexivity: Robust Asset versus Imposed Burden

If the natural habitat of Goffman's subject was the middle-class society of the mid-century United States, a different perspective on reflexivity can be found in the writings of Anthony Giddens. As one of the most prominent and productive of contemporary sociologists, Giddens has devoted a number of his works to the areas of globalization and late modernity; it is in this context that he has written about the contemporary self, most explicitly in Giddens (1991). Giddens's subject is seemingly always in the "on" mode; reflexivity never sleeps, given the swirling settings and intense dynamics of the contemporary world.

This subject of course encounters difficulties, is confronted by many uncertainties, but at bottom is robust and brave, and can make sense of his or her circumstances in culturally alert and socially astute ways. The biographical narratives that sustain identity and its lifestyles are always open for revision. The strategic interpretation of ever-changing (and to a great extent media-borne) cultural trends, norms, and values in late modernity is a key competence this subject possesses, as is the capacity to evaluate institutions, organizations, and technological developments. This is a compelling, upbeat portrait of a self that is creative and adaptable in the face of often intense socio-cultural turmoil, and largely in charge of his or her own life project. Giddens's work on politics (Giddens 1998, 2000) is informed by these horizons, resulting in a rather optimistic vision of a renewed social democracy.

Giddens's views have not surprisingly elicited critiques from a number of corners. Chief among the lines of criticism are that this notion of the self bears a strong resemblance to the classic liberal individual, and that it seems excessively in control of his or her life. Power relations, for example, never really quite impinge on his or her lifestyle choices. Moreover, this subject is at one with herself or himself—he or she is self-transparent, with no dark corners of repression, conflict, desire (the theme I take up in the next section). Where lives have increasingly become self-conscious projects to be navigated in stormy sociocultural seas, reflexivity is an obvious response. Yet the apparent efficacy with which Giddens imbues the subject seems rather independent of social position and cultural capital, while its political import remains muted.

Giddens's reassuring portrait of the late modern subject encounters a flip side in a literature that strikes a quite different tone about the subject. In the many works of Bauman (2007), Young (2007), Elliott and Lemert (2006), and others, a gloomier picture emerges. The subject is seen as struggling against imposing forces that threaten to overwhelm its ability to function effectively. Reflexivity becomes not just a pathway to freedom but at some moments a huge burden, at other times an inadequate strategy. In continuously having to rethink their day-to-day living and overall life courses, people are challenged in ways they cannot always handle well.

What Bauman calls the "liquid" character of late modernity means that its fluid, ever-changing character generates a permanent state of uncertainty and profound

ambivalence. A globalised and notoriously unstable capitalism alters economic realities, occupational structures, and employment possibilities. Shifting institutions and transient organizations; altered cultural patterns, values, and norms; and eroding everyday milieus all take their psychic toll in disorientation, anxiety, depression, and so forth. The subject appears as a harried and vulnerable creature, scurrying desperately to fashion a stable life and identity via consumerism and other practices that are predestined to merely reinforce the problems. The creative and adaptive character of the subject is not denied, but the forces she is up against are ominous, with the media often seen as accomplices to the overall pattern.

Performing Subjects/Subject to Performance

Goffman, Giddens, Bauman, and others offer versions of a subject that is characterized by multiplicity and/or malleability, capable of shifting modes in different contexts. Other trajectories explore such topics in different ways, for example, Butler's (1990) notion of gender as a constructed and performative dimension of the self that transcends the sexed male and female body. As a sort of radical postfeminism with overtones of Goffman and Foucault, her perspective sees the subject as enacting identity via society's prevalent discourses and codes. In this way, individuals strive to fill a psychic interior that in her view is ultimately empty. This is a decisive poststructuralist move: the reflexive self has no real core. Butler's is one major trajectory within queer theory (for a recent overview, see Wilchins 2004), a critical endeavor of its own, with a strong postmodern bent, that argues for the social constructedness of gender and sexual orientation and confronts notions of deviancy in these matters, seeing such labels an exercise of illegitimate and oppressive power.

At first glance, these developments may appear somewhat marginal to concerns about the civic subject, but they signal an important reformatting of the political terrain. The definitions of the subject with regard to the intimate realm of life—having to do with gender, sexual orientation, family, birthing, abortion, medical technologies concerning the body—have emerged from the private sanctums and increasingly become politicized issues. Thus, conceptions of the subject that incorporates civic engagement with these issues lead us into the emerging terrain that Plummer (2003) terms "intimate citizenship." We can see these inflections of the civic subject as theoretically ambitious vectors that can resonate with and align themselves with others that challenge rationalist positions and affirm the centrality of the private and the emotional reality in an expanded view of the political.

Transparency and Its Limits: The Challenge of the Unconscious

The Self's Internal Other

The notion of reflexivity that Giddens and others work with suggests that the subject can monitor not only the social environment but also his or her own experiences and

inner feelings, to a lesser or greater degree, and in that way make suitable adjustments in behavior. While not necessarily promising full transparency of the self and its emotional world, this model of the subject is not saddled with any a priori limits in this regard. But what if the case were precisely the opposite—what if the subject *by definition* can never really achieve access to itself, and is always and inevitably cut off from full awareness of its own inner workings? What if the subject cannot fully understand why he or she does and says all the things that he or she does? Do we really understand just why we respond to, say, political humor, in the ways that we do?

This of course is the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis and its view of the unconscious. There are other versions of the unconscious, but the Freudian model, with its various revisions and offshoots, has incontestably become the dominant one. Freud's view that people are to a significant extent shaped and driven by unacknowledged desires and fears, unresolved conflicts and guilt, and emotional double binds, that the self is cloven between its conscious awareness and a murky, elusive unconscious, was all very unsettling when first proposed, and remains controversial in some quarters.

The alleged lack of transparency of the psyche in particular subverted the ideal of self-mastery and control. That the anxieties of the inner self are blocked from view by elaborate processes of repression and forgetting implies that people are to some extent always doomed to be strangers unto themselves, even if psychoanalysis holds out the promise of gaining better insight into the workings of one's unconscious mind. The unconscious, according to Freud, is fundamentally geared toward pleasure, while being removed from the normal realities that govern our sense of the world. It has its own dynamics, which among other things, is apparently aloof to logical contradictions. Fear and desire, love and hate, respect and disdain, and so can all be copresent in regard to the same person, object, or set of beliefs. From this perspective, one can understand that we humans confront serious obstacles to communicative ethics, intersubjectivity, and authenticity.

Over the years, Freud's core ideas have been vehemently debated, often rejected; within psychoanalysis a variety of revisionist schools emerged. Attempts have been made to integrate psychoanalysis with other currents, such as Marxism and feminism, treating it as an analytic tool that can be used for progressive purposes to counter various forms of social and political oppression. For other critical thinkers, such as Foucault and some feminist theorists (including de Beauvoir), the Freudian model is seen instead as part of the oppressive apparatus, a technology of control, or at best an approach that deals with individuals' problems while ignoring their larger societal origins. On the other hand, many writers have used psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic tool, an interpretive scheme for understanding how literature, culture, and media phenomena (e.g., advertising, political speech) address their audiences and resonate through the unconscious.

Opaque Interiors, Contrasting Vistas

Despite this rich tradition, mainstream democratic theory has tended to avoid theories about the unconscious. Some psychoanalytically oriented authors have been inspired

by Lacan's reformulation of Freud, which, among other things, posits that the subject's selfhood is ultimately fictitious, being founded on a misrecognition of a unified, omnipotent self (deriving from the "mirror stage" of infancy). This poststructuralist version of the Freudian self is thus seen as an imaginary projection, one that can lead the adult subject into problems such as narcissistic delusion, if it cannot come to terms with its earlier misconceptions.

The immensely energetic Žižek, using Lacan as an analytic compass, emphasizes this idea of a lack, or void, at the core of the subject. This subterranean trauma, which people are always (usually unbeknownst to themselves) trying to rectify via various forms of fantasy and imagined identities, becomes a central psychic dynamic that he uses to interpret all manner of contemporary life, including popular culture as well as political developments (Žižek 2008, 2011). He charts how in politics this profound sense of insufficiency mobilizes pleasure and fear, and can lead people to respond positively to unsavory and undemocratic appeals.

Yet, the upshot of the fractured and decentered Freudian self can also lead in other directions. Castoriadis (1987) deploys the Freudian tradition but comes up with a rather different understanding of what limited self-transparency and the manifestations of fantasy can mean.

In brief, he puts the creative powers of the unconscious in focus. While creativity per se is no guarantee for the normatively desirable, he makes a cogent argument for the constructive powers of the imagination. With regard to the self, to social relations, and to society generally, not least at the political level, Castoriadis asserts that in the incessant flux of nonlogical, uncensored fantasy, the subject can generate identifications, make associations, and visualize connections that can break with established patterns of thought. Though this view of the unconscious retains its ambivalent or even contradictory character, his point is that such processes in the creative unconscious can still inspire progressive renewal at individual, social, cultural, and political levels. The glass of civic subjectivity remains half empty for Žižek and half full for Castoriadis.

The Freudian view of fear, desire, and pleasure accords affect a strong and volatile position, given that the unconscious usually slyly outwits conscious awareness and its rationalism. In regard to politics and communication, this means we need to analytically pay attention to not just information and formal argument but also to symbols, imagery, rhetoric, allegory, emotional pleas, ideology, and all the other communicative modes beyond the rational; it is through these that the civic subject takes on agency. We find such analyses in literary and cultural criticism, less so in media studies and much less so in political science. Thus, it is not surprising that none of the articles in this issue explicitly touches on this theme (and I would wish to make an appeal for more attention to be paid to the unconscious dimension of the civic subject).

However, in principle, in any situation that we are examining agency, there is always the possibility to angle the analysis through the theme of the unconscious. Trying to thus illuminate the subject in terms of how nontransparent psychic processes shape action and experience in a particular context can enhance our understanding of both the subject and the context. Some researchers of a more orthodox persuasion

would argue that this is the only route to go, while those of a more eclectic bent would see this as one of a number of possible approaches. No doubt, some forms of action and experience lend themselves more to such an analysis than others. For example, among the articles in this issue, those that focus on humor and comedy could probably more easily have made a turn toward the unconscious had the authors so chosen than those dealing with deliberation, given that humor often operates “behind our backs,” as it were, playing off the deeper, less transparent recesses of the psyche. (Yet I would wager that an interesting case could be made that even engaging in deliberation involves a degree of repression of some problematic emotionality.)

One could certainly apply a perspective on the unconscious to the text by Raymond Boyle and Lisa Kelly on business entertainment formats on television. They cogently affirm how the affective dimensions of popular culture challenge the primacy of the rationalist-informational horizon in helping us to understand the experience of viewing portrayals of socially relevant topics such as business careers. The pleasures of viewing are strong, even for people with business experience who can reflexively draw on that background to critically evaluate these programs. Meanwhile—and this is the upshot—younger viewers who have had less business experience are more likely to become inspired and feel empowered by them. From the perspective of the unconscious they are more likely to project their desires onto these programs. What is also interesting here is that we see how the unconscious facilitates and acts; it does not just inhibit. The power of pleasure in the more experienced viewers and the sense of empowerment among the younger ones were both predicated on degrees of blocked transparency of the self.

While the unconscious can be seen as simply a part of human reality—into which we may gain some degree of insight in but never fully grasp—it takes on societal significance in that it becomes entwined with how social relations operate, not least relations of power. Some theorists explicitly connect the unconscious to the dynamics of ideology, for example, Žizek, as I mentioned above. Thus, in a historical situation where neoliberalism is both a powerful and contested model for societal development, enthralling entertainment programs with visions of entrepreneurial success that mobilize powerful emotions among its viewers take on political relevance. Yet, in a case like this, the analytic significance of the lack of transparency of civic/viewing subject becomes almost secondary: it is the attributes of the (mediated) discursive environment itself that becomes pertinent. These shape the character of the political field, as well as the specific contours of the civic subject in concrete situations. This observation in turn leads us to our final theme, that of contingency.

Contingency: The Shifting Subject

Without Foundation

In contemporary social theory, the idea that action, phenomena, and events are “contextual,” that is, to some degree a product of the circumstances that both give rise to and delimit them, has become commonplace. Today we even assume that our ideas

and knowledge have their specific “conditions” and that our knowing is always to some degree “situated.” If these general premises are largely shared, it reflects the degree to which the notion of contingency is operative. Seen from that angle, the poststructural tradition called discourse theory (DT), as manifested chiefly in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001 for the key text, which first appeared in 1985), takes a strong stand in arguing for radical contingency across the board. This means that there is no foundation or essence, no fixed meaning—for knowledge, language, subjects, or social phenomena. In the social world, there are only possibilities, nothing is necessary. While some scholars might balk at what they see as an exaggeration of the contingency argument, I would suggest that this radical treatment invites us to reflect on where we would instead draw the lines and why, which can be an edifying exercise.

If the Freudian horizon tends to veer our attention inward to the tumultuous terrain of the unconscious as the motor that drives the subject, poststructural thought tends to give greater weight to external factors, chiefly the dynamics of discourses and language—not only in the piloting of the subject but also in actually generating it. Foremost DT is a philosophical enterprise, and Laclau and Mouffe’s text is well-known for being a rather daunting reading experience (for illuminating treatments, see Jorgensen and Phillips 2002; Smith 1999). Yet their project is explicitly democratic in its intent, and their text is certainly worth the effort it demands. Their horizons also have obvious connections to the media, though these links have in fact only begun to be explored rather recently (see Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Dahlberg and Phelan 2011; for DT’s relevance of cultural analysis more generally, see Carpentier and Spinog 2008).

Laclau and Mouffe’s intervention in the mid-1980s is often described as both a poststructural and a postmarxist effort to better align critical theory in keeping with historical realities. They emphasize the multiplicity and often shifting ground of subject positions in the modern world; social class, for example, is seen as one of many modes of identity. Subjects—and their knowledge—are socially constructed, but these processes always take place framed by power relations. In this view, even the terms, categories, and typifications that we use in our construction of the social world are already implicated in power relations. The political, in a sense, precedes the social. In society, it is always some particular discourses that have hegemonic sway at any point in time; these strongly shape the ways subjects, knowledge, and politics are engendered. The notion of discourse in DT can at first be confusing. While *discourse analysis* has become a ubiquitous methodological concept, in Laclau and Mouffe’s lexicon, *discourse* refers to social and material practices; it can thus have both linguistic and nonlinguistic dimensions.

Connecting with Democracy

Meaning is not just fluidly constructed and reconstructed by discourses, however; it is many times contested. DT’s concept of antagonism centers on the conflict over

meanings, definitions, and identities. It is here where politics arises. Prevailing (hegemonic) meanings and identities can be challenged, and at times are dislodged, or dissipated, via what the authors call “dislocation.” In evoking agonism, the notion of debate in the ancient Greek forums, Laclau and Mouffe underscore DT’s built-in democratic ethic. In democratic politics, they argue, we should strive to have political adversaries, not enemies, there should be rules of the game that all can follow, instead of resorting to violence. Political conflicts involve establishing boundaries between “us” and “them,” giving rise to identities that are specific and contingent to the circumstances. Some of these arguments appear in a more accessible form in Mouffe’s own work on radical democracy (i.e., Mouffe 2005), where she sets a course that challenges many elements of traditional liberal theory as well as Habermasian notions of deliberative democracy. Radical democracy theory admonishes us to understand and accept that conflict and the struggles for hegemony are inseparable from social life and that the political can arise anywhere. There is no harmonious, nonconflictual future waiting for us; the civic subject must always remain alert.

In contrast to most poststructural thought, Laclau and Mouffe’s discursively constructed and highly contingent subject is afforded a rather impressive degree of agency. Discourses can constrain, but they can also empower; this civic subject can act, make choices, and have political impact—collectively, via group identifications. There is a detailed conceptual apparatus within DT that can be empirically applied in regard to politics and the media (those ubiquitous carriers of discourses), particularly in examining alternative politics (Dahlberg and Phelan 2011; Uldam 2010). What DT does is to provide analytic tools for illuminating the forces and conditions that shape the subject and its political playing field, without any built-in predetermination.

While none of the articles in this issue specifically fly the DT flag, most of them in various ways underscore the theme of contingency. Thus, in John Corner’s piece on political humor, one can always speculate on the psychoanalytic aspects of humor, for example, in regard to it serving as a “safety valve,” a release for repressed feelings, what I find most relevant in this text is the steps it takes in mapping specific attributes of political humor as well as existing sets of meanings among viewers. These attributes and meanings serve as discursive contingencies that can shape the subject position of citizens vis-à-vis the political system. In other words, Corner shows that humor in television genres beyond journalism can have political impact on civic subjects, but underscores that formal features of this humor as well as predispositions of the subjects are decisive in determining this impact.

For their part, Van Zoonen et al. in their conclusions suggest that while humor can be a civic practice—and that the affective domain of popular culture more broadly comprises important elements in the dynamics of democracy—it must be situated in its context. By extension, the implied civic subject who engages with the vlogs is amenable to the emotive qualities of humor, but that the vlogs as such were for the most part insufficient to trigger the kind of self-reflection we associate with the better forms of citizens’ political involvement. We might also suggest, as a further theoretical step, that the “uncivic” and excluding character of many of the comments indicate that the

vlogs largely reproduced various hegemonic discourses that cluster around the signifiers Islam and Muslim in Western society, serving to cement the contingent subject positions of the commentators. The vlogs for the most part did not dislocate these hegemonies, nor render problematic the subject positions of the respondents. In psychoanalytic terms, the humor did not help achieve much self-transparency among the commentators, as evidenced by the fear, aggression, and “othering” that they expressed.

Returning to Tobias Olsson and Fredrik Miegel’s text, with its emphasis on civic development via social interaction, we must keep in mind that there is nothing we can take for granted here in regard to the positive impact of civic cultures; it is always up for grabs. This qualifier leads us to critically examine the contexts of civic cultures, as well as the specific character of their six dimensions, in any given setting. Hegemonic discursive structures, the agonistic and antagonistic interplay of meaning and identities, are the embodiments of civic cultures’ potentialities—as well as inexorable parts of social life. Thus, the learning of citizenship, democratic values, practices, and identities—none of this can be taken for granted; there are no guarantees. Dewey’s vision of civic socialization, translated into our historical context in terms of civic cultures, will not materialize on its own. It must be nourished and asserted; it is part of the struggles for democracy.

Composing the Civic Subject

So what do we do with all this? Clearly, no hard-and-fast conclusions are in order. I have been probing a large and diverse literature, drawing out specific features, similarities, and differences with regard to versions of the civic subject and the media, and refracting the other articles in this issue through these lenses. As we have seen, tracking the civic subject via the attributes of rationalism, reflexivity, transparency, and contingency can offer some lucid revelations. In many cases, we can see a theoretically marginalized civic subject, one who, if brought out on the playing field, could function in different ways and have different consequences in democratic processes.

How we conceptualize civic subjectivity has implications of the inflection we give to democracy. From the liberal rationalist ideal, to the deliberative model, to the interfaces with popular culture and affect, and on to various optimistic or dire views of late modern democracy, and on to the view of democracy as an ominous challenge to the unconscious or as an inherently unstable discursive construction, versions of the compatible civic subject hover close at hand. It will help us analytically to further explore these connections. Sometimes seen with optimism, other times conveying regret, the self in these various traditions is often less of an explicit psychological portrait and more of a diagnostic metaphor for the state of democracy and of our societal condition. We might conceptually test various models, and evaluate the outcome, even inserting empirical data into these constructs. In any case, we will have to accept that the “real” subject no doubt will always remain elusive to some degree; any version we might compose will always be but a partial rendering.

Yet in valorizing one or other elements in our portrait, we can illuminate different ways of enacting citizenship, and doing democracy, and see how that fits with our visions of the good society. Leaving the civic subject just a little open, slightly ajar, will also avoid unnecessary closure in the ways we think about democracy—and about ourselves as citizens.

Acknowledgments

My warm thanks to Annette Hill, Fredrik Miegel, and Vicki Mayer for helpful comments on an earlier version of this text.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bauman, Z. 2007. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Carpentier, N., and B. De Cleen. 2007. "Bringing Discourse Theory into Media Studies." *Journal of Language and Politics* 6 (2): 265–93.
- Carpentier, N., and E. Spinog, eds. 2008. *Discourse Theory and Cultural Analysis*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Castoriadis, C. 1987. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Corner, J., and D. Pels, eds. 2003. *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage.
- Dahlgren, P. 2009. *Media and Political Participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahlberg, L., and S. Phelan, eds. 2011. *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Elliott, A. 2008. *Concepts of the Self*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Elliott, A., and C. Lemert. 2006. *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalisation*. London: Routledge.
- Gardiner, M. E. 2004. "Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere." In *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, edited by N. Crossly and J. M. Roberts, 28–48. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gauntlett, D. 2008. *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. 1998. *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Giddens, A. 2000. *The Third Way and Its Critics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. 2006. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. 1983. "The Interaction Order." *American Sociological Review* 48:1–17.
- Habermas, J. 1984, 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hall, C. 2005. *The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory beyond the Reign of Reason*. New York: Routledge.
- Hermes, J. 2005. *Re-reading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Inin, E. F., and B. S. Turner, eds. 2003. *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*. London: Sage.
- Jorgensen, M., and L. Phillips. 2002. "Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory." In *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, edited by M. Jorgensen and L. Phillips, 24–59. London: Sage.
- Kohn, M. 2000. "Language, Power, and Persuasion: Towards a Critique of Deliberative Democracy." *Constellations* 7 (3): 408–29.
- Laclau, E., and C. Mouffe. 2001. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.
- Lister, R. 2003. *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan.
- Marcus, G. 2002. *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Mouffe, C. 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Plummer, K. 2003. *Intimate Citizenship*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Smith, A. M. 1999. *Laclau and Mouffe. The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. London: Routledge.
- Street, J. 1997. *Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Uldam, J. 2010. "Fickle Commitment: Fostering Political Engagement in the 'Flighty World of Online Activism'" (unpublished PhD dissertation). Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School.
- Van Zoonen, L. 2005. *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Voet, R. 1998. *Feminism and Citizenship*. London: Sage.
- Wilchins, R. 2004. *Gender Theory, Queer Theory: An Instant Primer*. Los Angeles: Alyson.
- Young, J. 2007. *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Zizek, S. 2008. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, S. 2011. *Living in the End of Times*. London: Verso.

Bio

Peter Dahlgren is professor emeritus at the Department of Communication and Media, Lund University, Sweden. His work focuses on media and democracy, from the horizons of late modern social and cultural theory. Active in European academic networks, he has also been a visiting scholar at several universities. His recent publications include *Media and Political Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and the coedited volume *Young People, ICTs and Democracy* (Nordicom, 2010).