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# Democracy & Education

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## How to End a Discussion Consensus or Hegemony?

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### Abstract

By taking the vantage point of agonistic pluralism, the aim is to enter into dialogue with Samuelsson's theoretical development of consensus as an educational aim for classroom discussions. The response highlights three points of interest in the deliberative conception of consensus. The first point relates to the problem of exclusion, which Samuelsson clearly framed as something that concerns deliberative theory and agonistic theory. The second point is about the relation between conflict and consensus and the kind of conflict that is compatible with Samuelsson's idea of consensus. The concluding part of this response is an exploration of how the agonistic concept of hegemony could function as an alternative aim for ending classroom discussions.

### This article is in response to

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### Introduction

**I**N HIS ARTICLE "Education for Deliberative Democracy and the Aim of Consensus," Samuelsson (2018) further developed deliberative theory in relation to educational questions. Samuelsson's article could be considered one of a series, in which he developed and improved deliberation as an educational theory (see Samuelsson, 2013, 2016; Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). In the article, he theoretically developed a cornerstone of deliberative theory, namely the aim for consensus. This clear focus on the main concept in deliberative theory is a very welcome contribution to the current debate on democratic education and, as I see it, to the ongoing discussion between deliberative and agonistic scholars.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Samuelsson (2018) used the term *radical pluralist* to describe Chantal Mouffe's position in relation to deliberative theory (p. 2). I have chosen to use the term *agonism/agonistic scholars* instead of *radical pluralism/radical*

Samuelsson's (2018) article touched upon one of the main questions that democratic education needs to handle: What should characterize political discussions in the classroom? For instance, should classroom discussions focus mainly on rational arguments,

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*pluralists* to describe Mouffe's position and the educational perspective that is based on Mouffe's theory. Without getting into a conceptual discussion about agonism and radical pluralism (or the concept of radical democracy), I consequently use the term *agonism*, as it frames the arguments in this article within the ongoing educational debate about deliberative theory and agonism (see, for example, Englund, 2016; Ljunggren, 2007; Lo, 2017; Ruitenberg, 2009; Thomas-Reid, 2018; Zembylas, 2018).

or should they be open to emotions and identities? When teachers plan for a discussion in the classroom, they can have different aims or ideas as to how they want that discussion to end. Consensus constitutes one such aim, and it can be one way to end a discussion.

As Samuelsson (2018) pointed out, the aim for consensus cannot be transferred undistorted from political theories to teaching and classroom discussions. As a classroom is not a parliament or a political party, the question of what the aim for consensus can (and should) mean in a classroom cannot be answered solely by political theory. Since it is an educational issue, it requires educational answers (cf. Hess & McAvoy, 2015). By drawing on empirical examples, Samuelsson highlighted how classroom discussions could aim for different kinds of consensus. For instance, students can reach a consensus on what food they should serve at their party but still disagree on *why* they should serve that food. They do not have to reach a consensus on both *what to serve* and *why to serve it* in order to reach a decision that they all can agree to. In a broader sense, this means that the kind of consensus that is suitable for a classroom may not be the same kind of consensus that is appropriate for other political discussions. This theoretical clarification of what the aim for consensus means in education gives new insights into what could be considered a desirable way of ending classroom discussions.

In this response to Samuelsson's (2018) article, I would like to highlight two main questions facing deliberative theory, both of which are accentuated by Samuelsson's article. The first is the question of exclusion: How can deliberative theory account for and deal with what is outside consensus? If the aim of classroom discussions is to reach consensus in difficult and burning political issues, it is crucial to highlight *what* is outside consensus and *why* certain positions are excluded.

The second question concerns the notion of conflict. Samuelsson (2018) set out to explore and formulate a notion of consensus that takes conflict seriously. What I want to highlight is the need for a discussion about what kind of phenomenon conflict is. If the aim of classroom discussions is to reach a consensus that is compatible with conflicts, we need to specify what we mean by conflict by asking: Which conflicts between students are compatible with the aim for consensus?

I end my response by turning to the agonistic notion of *hegemony* and briefly elaborate on how hegemony could be considered an alternative to Samuelsson's (2018) idea of consensus as an educational aim for ending classroom discussions.

### What Are the Grounds for Exclusion?

Samuelsson (2018) pointed to how the aim for consensus has been criticized within educational theory. The critique from agonistic/radical democratic scholars has pointed out that the aim for consensus can suppress and exclude the political positions and opinions of those who are not in power and, in that way, reaffirm those with power. For example, in a classroom discussion, this could mean that the popular students will be the ones that implicitly decide "what we all agree to." With this said, criticizing the aim of consensus from an agonistic perspective is nothing new, this critique has been a part of the ongoing discussion between

deliberative and agonistic scholars (Samuelsson, 2018, pp. 2–3, 5).

When discussing the aim of consensus, the question of exclusion is accentuated. Drawing on the field of political theory, Samuelsson (2018) rightly pointed out that there must be some form of exclusion; otherwise we would end up with a situation in which anything goes and "any substantive position would be worthy of the respect of others" (p. 5). Given the ongoing development of misogynistic and racist politics that are becoming an unquestioned part of the public debate, at least in Europe, Samuelsson was right in saying that political life depends on some form of exclusion. In that sense, the question of exclusion is not a problem that is specific to deliberative theory but rather to democratic theory as such, and therefore also a problem for agonistic pluralism. "Thus, it is not only deliberative democracy and its ideal of consensus that excludes certain types of citizens, behavior, and positions from democratic participation" (p. 5). Given this account, we can see that the question of exclusion in political discussions is something that concerns both deliberative and agonistic scholars. A main question is then: On what grounds should certain positions be excluded from democratic participation? In a classroom discussion in which the aim is to reach consensus, the crucial question is: What are the grounds for excluding certain positions from a classroom discussion and, moreover, are these grounds themselves open for discussion? As I see it, it is in answering these questions that deliberative theory becomes problematic.

Here, at least two answers are available for deliberative theory. The first would be to ground consensus in rationality. In this way, a rational and strong argument would be what brings students toward a consensus. Seeing rationality as the basis for consensus would also mean that it is the students' arguments and claims that are at stake in the classroom, rather than their identities.

The agonistic critique of this notion of rationality is that grounding exclusion in the idea of a "neutral" rationality is never a neutral act but always a political act that draws a line between those who are considered legitimate participants and those who are considered illegitimate. In short, the agonistic critique points to how the idea of rationality conceals the political and contingent aspects of exclusion, that is, there is no external natural law that constitutes the boundary between the legitimate and illegitimate participant (Mouffe, 2005, p. 121). If the act of excluding certain positions is concealed as being a political decision, it means that students are not given any opportunity to discuss the exclusion. From an agonistic perspective, it can be considered crucial that the teacher highlights how and why exclusion is a political decision and how the boundaries of consensus never can be immune from contestation (see Mouffe, 2005, p. 56). Thus, the problem with grounding consensus in rationality is that it limits the opportunities for students to discuss what is excluded and why certain positions should be excluded. As I see it, the importance of framing exclusion as a political decision is not primarily about philosophical arguments, but about the educational possibilities that such discussions can bring about. If the boundaries of consensus are already set by rationality before the classroom discussion begins, the potential outcomes of the discussion will be curtailed.

The second answer is to ground consensus in essentialism. However, this would seem to rub against the nerve of deliberative democracy and, in a broader sense, liberal democracy. Grounding consensus in essentialism would imply that the boundaries between those who participate in the deliberations and those who are excluded stem from a conception about who the others *are*. Such essentialism could easily become a pathway for racist or misogynistic ideas about essential differences between students and would therefore not be a real alternative for deliberative theory or for democratic education as such.

The agonistic answer to the question is that exclusion should be *politically* grounded. This means that the boundary between “us” and “them” should be based on the differences between what we and they *want*, not ideas about who we or the others essentially *are* (Mouffe, 2005). Moreover, from an agonistic perspective, students should be given the opportunity to form collective identities based on what they (politically) want, regardless of their prescribed identities (Zembylas, 2011). When it comes to democratic participation, the political boundary is between those who adhere to the key values of democracy (equality and liberty) and those who do not. This is the idea of “conflictual consensus,” which means:

*... consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality of all, dissent about their interpretation. A line should therefore be drawn between those who reject those values outright and those who, while accepting them, fight for conflicting interpretations. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 121)*

Establishing such a consensus is never about a rational all-inclusive consensus, but from an agonistic perspective is about establishing a hegemony, in this case the establishment of liberty and equality for all as hegemonic values (Gürsözlü, 2009). This means that the justification of these values is not located *before* or *outside* the discussion itself (Sund & Öhman, 2014). However, what is important to bear in mind is that given this agonistic perspective, classroom discussions about controversial and political issues would not mean opening up for “anything goes” or an approach where “any substantive position would be worthy of the respect of others” (Samuelsson, 2018, p. 5). What it does mean is that the conflictual consensus and its boundaries would be grounded in the students’ political act of articulating exclusions and establishing values as hegemonic. Within the scope of democratic education, the goal would be for students to establish liberty and equality as hegemonic values—not because they would find them most rational but because they would find them most desirable. Placing desire and will in the foreground, instead of rationality, would also have consequences when it comes to concrete classroom discussions. Imagine that students discuss whether it is right to join a climate strike. In this case, what would bring (some) students together in a will-formation would perhaps not be the rational arguments but could be their joint desire, values, and sense of identity. As this issue is inseparable from students’ hope and fear of the future, a valid argument would not only revolve around what is most rational to do but could also be about what they *want to do* and what they want to achieve. Thus, the very things that make the issue a burning political issue in the first place, things such as

desire, value, and identity, would not be left out of the discussion. The boundaries between “us” and “them” would in this sense be based on what the students *want*, and the political identities that can take form out of their collective will (see Mouffe, 2005; see also Ljunggren, 2008; Zembylas, 2011).

In line with Samuelsson (2018), I agree that the question of exclusion is a crucial one for democratic education. However, I find it difficult to see what answer deliberative theory can provide us with when it comes to the grounds on which exclusion should be made. Would it, for instance, be possible from a deliberative point of view to argue that exclusions in a classroom discussion should be politically grounded? If so, would this be compatible with the deliberative idea of consensus? As I see it, the question of exclusion is important, and the answers that deliberative theory can provide are imperative for understanding what the aim for consensus means in classroom discussions.

I now turn to the second main point in my response to Samuelsson’s (2018) article: the conception of conflict in relation to consensus.

### What Is a Conflict?

In exploring different notions of consensus, Samuelsson (2018) raised a crucial question: “how to formulate a notion of consensus that takes pluralism, dissensus, and disagreement seriously” (p. 6). This relates to the critique that has been directed toward deliberative theory from an agonistic perspective. In short, the critique has highlighted how the aim of consensus overlooks the conflictual dimension of political life (see, for example, Ruitenberg, 2009). Samuelsson’s outline provides an answer to how different notions of consensus relate to pluralism, dissensus and disagreement. He illustrated how consensus is “a multifaceted concept that, on its own, will not eliminate all possibilities for disagreement” (p. 7). Moreover, by making a distinction between *preference consensus* and *normative consensus*, he showed how students can reach agreement in one form, while at the same time failing to reach it in another. Students can reach a *preference consensus*, meaning that they agree on *what to do* and still fail to reach a *normative consensus* by disagreeing on *why they should that*. An illustrative example of this is if students all agree to serve pizza at their party. In that sense, they have reached a preference consensus on *what to do*. However, they can support the decision to serve pizza for different reasons, meaning that they disagree on *why to do that* (p. 6). With this distinction in the foreground, Samuelsson argued that going for preference consensus might be a suitable educational aim: “[I]n a deliberative educative sense, it might be more suitable to strive for a preference consensus because that would allow students to practice the type of consensus deliberative democracy is most interested in reaching” (p. 7). Aiming for this form of consensus means that it is not the students’ values or deeply embedded emotions that are at stake in the discussion, but rather the more practical question of what to do.

Given this distinction, we could ask if this setup of agreement/disagreement really is a notion of consensus that takes conflict seriously. We could argue that the question *what to do* qualitatively differs from the question *why do that*. In that sense, there is nothing

special about students agreeing on one issue and disagreeing on another. As I understand it, disagreement on these two different questions does not necessarily imply a notion of consensus that is compatible with conflict. I am not claiming that the aim for consensus in classroom discussions should mean that students need to agree on *what to do* and *why to do it*. What I want to point to is that it is difficult to grasp what aiming for consensus and at the same time taking “pluralism, dissensus, and disagreement seriously” would mean in practical terms in a classroom discussion (see Samuelsson, 2018, p. 6.)

Furthermore, what needs to be highlighted here is that not only are there different notions of consensus but also there are different notions of conflict. So, in addition to Samuelsson’s (2018) question about which notions of consensus take conflict seriously, we also need to ask: Which notions of conflict are compatible with the deliberative idea of consensus?

I have elsewhere argued that deliberative and agonistic theories seem to have profoundly different conceptions of what a conflict is. In short, deliberative theory draws on an ontic understanding of conflict, while agonism draws on an ontological understanding of conflict (Tryggvason, 2018a). Without going into a conceptual discussion about this, my point here is to link Samuelsson’s (2018) question about consensus with a question of what a conflict is.

Imagine a teacher planning for a political discussion. If the aim of that discussion is that the students should reach some form of consensus, then it would be reasonable to say that such an aim would rely both on an understanding of what consensus is and some idea of what a conflict is—whether that idea is made explicit or not. So, if Samuelsson (2018) is right, in that preference consensus is a suitable aim for classroom discussions, we also need to ask what kind of conflicts can (and cannot) be overcome by this consensus.

### Aiming for Hegemony Instead of Consensus

By way of conclusion, I would like to turn to Samuelsson’s call: “[T]here has to be more to democracy than purely disagreement, confrontation and disruption” (Samuelsson, 2018, p. 5). In this he is absolutely right. Democracy needs sedimentation and stability. Conflict needs to be resolved and decisions need to be made. Perhaps the answer is not consensus, but hegemony?

The concept *hegemony* has some troubling connotations, especially in relation to democratic education. In daily use it can mean the dominance of one position or ideology over others. In that sense, a hegemonic relation is always an asymmetric power relation. Bringing hegemony into the discussion of democratic education therefore requires both a critical discussion as well as careful considerations. Given this, my outline here should be understood as a tentative elaboration on how hegemony could function as an alternative to consensus in classroom discussions. The notion of hegemony that I draw on has its roots in Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985/2001) theoretical work, which is closely related to Mouffe’s (2005) agonistic theory. As with its daily use, hegemony is within Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical framework a concept that is about asymmetric power relations.

When bringing hegemony into the discussion of democratic education, it needs to be thought of as an empty container. What

becomes important is not the fact that something *is* hegemonic but rather the question: *What* is hegemonic, and is it compatible with democratic education? (For a similar, formalistic, way to use *populism* in relation to democratic education, see Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017.) The fact that something is hegemonic does not necessarily mean that it is bad or undesirable. For instance, the hegemony of liberal democracy over fascism in European politics is a dominance and an asymmetric power relation that is worth defending. In democratic education the values of democracy are hegemonic, that is, democratic education aims at reproducing democratic life and carries the hope that the students will cherish liberty and equality. As these values are hegemonic in democratic education it means that actions and arguments that go against them will not pass unnoticed or without discussion.

So, what could this mean in practice when students discuss an issue in the classroom? Let us return to the case of students discussing whether it is right to join a climate strike. The students argue back and forth and shape both their arguments and opinions while discussing with each other. We then imagine that one opinion takes the higher ground in the discussion, for example, the opinion that it is wrong for students to join the climate strike. As this opinion becomes hegemonic, it establishes an asymmetric power relation to other opinions. Students arguing against it would experience that they were struggling against the stream and that their own arguments were coming out on the losing end. What should the teacher do in a situation like this? From a deliberative perspective, the teacher should encourage the students to reach a consensus. This means that the goal for the teacher would be that all students agree on whether it is right to join the climate strike. In contrast, from an agonistic perspective, it would be considered valuable, both democratically and educationally, that students are able to reach a closure in the discussion even if they do not agree with one another. The teacher could, for example, end the discussion by summarizing the different positions and *make visible* what opinion became hegemonic in the discussion (cf. Sund & Öhman, 2014, pp. 651–652).

In this sense, making the hegemony of one opinion visible could be a way to end the discussion and reach a temporary closure. What becomes crucial is not only that the hegemonic opinion is visible, but also that it is compatible with democracy and the values of liberty and equality (see Mouffe, 2005, pp. 121–122). The aim would not be that all students agree with each other but rather that they all can come to terms with the outcome of the discussion.

Furthermore, aiming for hegemony would mean that the teacher aims at enabling clashing opinions to be maintained as *political* positions. As political positions, it would mean that the lines between “us” and “them” that are drawn in classroom discussions would be based on diverging opinions, rather than essentialist notions of “us” and “them” (Mouffe, 2005). When the boundary between us/them is based on diverging opinions it implies that individual students can cross the boundary as soon as they change their minds. For instance, students can change their minds about whether it is right to join the climate strike or not, but that does not mean that the different positions should collapse into each in the name of consensus (see Lo, 2017). This is of course

easier said than done, as opinions that are truly political are also unavoidably entangled with both emotions and identities (Zembylas, 2009). This idea of hegemony means that the formation of an “us” is a position that is not open to every opinion but is open to all students to enter into if they change their minds. As hegemony is a concept that draws on an understanding of conflict as an ontological phenomenon, we could say that *hegemony ends the discussion but not the conflict* (Tryggvason, 2018b).

It is important to underscore that this should not be understood in terms of being a closure where students simply “agree to disagree.” The notion of hegemony comes with a stronger claim. As described before, establishing a hegemony as a way to end a classroom discussion would imply that some position(s) will become hegemonic; some students will experience that their opinion takes the higher ground in the discussion, whereas other students will experience the opposite. As I see it, it could be considered educationally valuable that students get to experience both what it means to win and what it means to lose democratic conflicts. Furthermore, as a classroom discussion is a staged setting, one that is planned by the teacher and is also based on the teacher’s consideration and knowledge about the students, it is perhaps the best place for young people to experience both sides of democracy.

In relation to this, I think that the need for closure in classroom discussions cannot be overemphasized. Hess and McAvoy (2015) have pointed out that classrooms are “unusual political spaces,” in that students are practically stuck with each other even after leaving the classroom. For example, they go to other classes together and sometimes even spend many years together in constellations over which they have no power (p. 6). Reaching a closure in heated discussions therefore seems to be extremely important in classrooms. Hegemony can here be one educational ideal for reaching a closure in heated discussions without aiming for consensus.

To conclude, Samuelsson’s (2018) article brings new thoughts and perspectives to deliberative theory and to the scholarly debate about deliberation and agonism as educational ideals. His development of what the aim for consensus means in the classroom provides insights into both the merits and problems with consensus as an educational ideal. The proposal of hegemony that I put forward in this response is an idea of how to end discussions. However, when it comes to the ongoing discussion between scholars advocating deliberation and those advocating agonism, there seems to be no closure within reach. On the contrary, the discussion is as vital as ever. Given the characteristics of political discussions in the media and in the public sphere, the question of how students should discuss political issues in the classroom is perhaps more important than ever before. As an “unusual political space,” the classroom can provide students with experiences of political discussions that some may not encounter elsewhere. With this in mind, the ongoing debate about deliberation and agonism, to which Samuelsson’s article makes an important contribution, is crucial for both democracy and education.

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