

## DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AS DENUATION: MOVING BEYOND RISK TAKING

**Y. Waghid\***

e-mail: yw@sun.ac.za

**N. Davids\***

e-mail: nur@sun.ac.za

\*Department of Education Policy Studies

University of Stellenbosch

Stellenbosch, South Africa

### ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that democratic engagement as a form of human action can be enhanced if enacted through disclosure. Firstly, we expand on the notion of democratic engagement whereby human action is enacted through democratic iterations, mutual respect and humanness. Secondly, we argue that practising humanness, such as when one learns from others, can most appropriately be enacted when one becomes reflectively open to the new, and reflectively loyal to the known. Thirdly, because of the latter point, we draw on Giorgio Agamben's (2011) notion of denudation whereby it is argued that forms of human engagement can become substantively democratic if enacted through an unconcealed disclosedness, in other words, an unveiling of the self in which visibility and presence (nudity) hold sway. Inasmuch as others open themselves up to one, so one ought to disclose oneself to others in order for the encounter to remain democratic. And, when such a form of democratic engagement assumes a form of denudation, the possibility is always there that human action will be enacted through an unveiling of the self, which is infinitely free of secret. Hopefully then, democratic engagement will be more unconstrained and unrestricted by that which might be otherwise contained.

**Key words:** denudation, democratic engagement, risk-taking

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, we argue that democratic engagement as a form of human action can be enhanced if enacted through disclosure. Firstly, we expand on the notion of democratic engagement whereby human action is enacted through democratic iterations, mutual respect and humanness. Secondly, we argue that practising humanness, such as when one learns from others, can most

appropriately be enacted when one becomes reflectively open to the new, and reflectively loyal to the known. Thirdly, because of the latter point, we draw on Giorgio Agamben's (2011) notion of 'denudation' whereby it is argued that forms of human engagement can become substantively democratic if enacted through an unconcealed disclosedness, in other words, an unveiling of the self in which visibility and presence (nudity) hold sway. Inasmuch as others open themselves up to one, so one ought to disclose oneself to others in order for the encounter to remain democratic. And, when such a form of democratic engagement assumes a form of denudation, the possibility is always there that human action will be enacted through an unveiling of the self, which is infinitely free of secret. Hopefully then, democratic engagement will be more unconstrained and unrestricted by that which might be otherwise contained.

## **DEMOCRATIC ITERATIONS AND RECIPROCITY AS FORMS OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT**

By way of introduction, much has been written about the notion of democratic engagement in relation to dialogical forms of human action. First, Seyla Benhabib (2011) offers an account of deliberative democratic engagement whereby human beings listen to one another with the aim to talk back reflexively to one another, that is, to take one another's points of view into iterative scrutiny. In Benhabib's words, '[b]y *democratic iterations* I mean complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked ... in the associations of civil society' (Benhabib 2011, 129). In other words, human beings do not just deliberate to allow one another an opportunity to respond critically to one another. Rather, their interactions are meant to provoke one another to think and to act differently and thus to see the point of their democratic engagements in a contested atmosphere without being remiss of treating one another with dignity. In this sense, humans are self-interpreting beings who have 'the capacity to initiate action and opinion to be shared by others ...' (Benhabib 2011, 129). Following Benhabib, democratic engagement is therefore not merely associated with enframing people's collective existence; it is also an enlargement of people's moral perspectives 'in virtue of their humanity *simpliciter*' (Benhabib 2011, 75).

Second, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004, 178) elucidate collective human co-existence on the basis that 'people should be treated as free and equal citizens'. For them, democratic engagement is explicitly concerned with people seeking moral agreement when they can engage in and/or about public policy through deliberation, and 'maintaining mutual respect when they cannot [reach agreement]' (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 178). This kind

of democratic reciprocity ‘asks citizens to try to justify their political views to one another, and to treat with respect those who make good-faith efforts to engage in this mutual enterprise even when they cannot resolve their disagreements’ (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 179). The point is that democratic engagement (reciprocity) calls for people to engage equally with one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect even if they vehemently disagree. This kind of dignified relationship among humans engaged in democratic reciprocity is cultivated through an ‘open-mindedness ... [and] respect for differing points of view without either endorsing them as clearly correct or rejecting them as clearly incorrect’ (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 185). In this way, through democratic engagement, people not only retain their dignity but the possibility for reasonable agreement and disagreement is also always there. That is, democratic reciprocity does not require moral detachment from one another. Instead, democratic reciprocity would judge injustice harshly and praise just actions (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 186). By implication, people engaged in democratic reciprocity will not find themselves detached from one another, because moral disagreement should not be a reason for excluding others from the deliberation.

## **TOWARDS AN EXPANDED VIEW OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH HUMANNESS**

David T. Hansen (2011, 22–23) posits that central to any form of educational experience, notwithstanding a democratic one, is a form of humaneness (referred to by Benhabib (2011) and Gutmann and Thompson (2004) respectively as ‘dignity’ and ‘respect’). For Hansen (2011, 22), humaneness is tantamount to ‘practicing justice towards others’ in that it ‘privileges learning from others over resolving tensions to one’s personal satisfaction’. Whereas, Benhabib and Gutmann and Thompson seemingly advocate an understanding of humaneness as a democratic virtue whereby people are mutually engaged in deliberative iterations and reasonable agreements and disagreements, Hansen (2011, 22) explains humaneness as ‘a mode of work rather than a final achievement’ that involves ‘*learning from others*’. By the latter, Hansen means a capacity to wait and see and listen and a desire to understand the other (Hansen 2011, 23). In this way, humaneness implies a democratic etiquette whereby human beings are not in isolation from one another but in perpetual communication. They respect truths and appreciate what it means to dwell with one another in community across space and time, differences and commonalities. In other words, people in deliberation engage with one another in an uncertain world without acts of inhumanity towards one another. They interact with one another and even absorb ideas from others without being judgmental and dismissive (Hansen 2011, 70). As such,

humans remain open to practices of listening, speaking and interacting, and are receptive towards '*learning with others*', a matter of being in deliberation whereby people show a desire to understand each other and to listen and talk to the other. Through deliberative engagement, humans engage in an encounter with the new rather than merely a rehearsal of the known, which means 'regarding subject matter (about which they converse) an occasion for new thinking rather than projecting into it prior understandings and assumptions' (Hansen 2011, 12). In other words, humans do not just wait for agreement to be achieved but they engage humanely in democratic action (Hansen 2011, 28). In enacting oneself humanely in relation to others, humans pursue 'a reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known' (Hansen 2011, 32). In a different way, humans move and artfully engage in practices that 'reflect a conscious concern to conduct themselves in deliberative ways' (Hansen 2011, 86). In this sense, humans remain 'in process of becoming through the experience of reflective openness to the new fused with reflective loyalty to the known' (Hansen 2011, 86).

Our interest is in Hansen's (2011) depiction of humanness as an enactment of democratic engagement such that it (i.e. humanness) can cultivate a reflective openness to the new and a reflective loyalty to the known. We are attracted to democratic engagement as the cultivation of humanness for two reasons. In the first instance, learning from others through a reflective openness to the new is a recognition that a democratic encounter can be uncertain, which implies that the unexpected can happen. In other words, human relations in an uncertain world cannot always be perfectly planned, rationalised and predicted. Currently in South Africa, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) could not have anticipated or predicted that its political hegemony would be seriously challenged by members of its own party, considering the role the party has played in the demise of the apartheid regime, and in ushering in a new democracy. Consequently, one finds that Hansen (2011, 54–55) posits that '[d]eliberative ways of listening, speaking, waiting, reading, writing, memorizing, repeating and judging ... [should be attentive to] different points of view and a more patient approach to conflicts of interests and concern'. Put differently, being reflectively open to the new firstly implies that democratic encounters should remain sensitive to humanness, and secondly, being reflectively loyal to the known implies that a more lucid understanding of what is already known would invariably enhance one's understanding of a particular situation. For instance, if it is already known that democratic encounters include rather than exclude people, then being reflectively loyal to such an encounter means that one can be open to more innovative ways of securing inclusion. Thus, by being reflectively open to the new and reflectively loyal to the known, one might avoid doing harm to others in a democratic encounter. One would thus have developed a sense of self-

control which is not dismissive of what other have to say ‘thereby making possible humane ways of dwelling together’ (Hansen 2011, 55). On the one hand, the pervading chaos, which has come to define any gathering of political parties (whether in parliament, or not), therefore offers profound insight into the incapacity and unwillingness of people to encounter the other in a meaningful way. On the other hand, ‘humane ways of dwelling together’ become impossible when that humanity is not displayed in how others are treated. In this regard, the almost daily occurrences of various forms of protest (ranging from shutting down highways to the more recent torching of 25 schools in Limpopo [cf. Author, date]) is a loud reminder that not only are the majority of people excluded from meaningful democratic encounters, but also that their humanness is not being acknowledged by the democracy within which they find themselves.

However, being reflectively open to the new and reflectively loyal to the known implies other humans need to open themselves up to one in order for one to learn from them. But, for a democratic encounter to be mutually open, one also needs to open up the self to others. Put differently, one needs to disclose oneself to others in order for the latter to engage with one openly. However, it seems as if democratic iterations and democratic reciprocity might not be sufficient to elicit more open and unconstrained forms of human (inter)action. That is, people can deliberate iteratively and engage one another reciprocally but this does not necessarily mean that they would always exhibit a humaneness towards one another. For instance, after the popular uprisings of masses of people against dictatorships on the African continent (for example, in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya) – referred to commonly as the ‘Arab Spring’ – several governments that initially deliberated iteratively and reciprocally with members of civil society became even more inhumane towards any form of public dissent. Our contention is that, unless democratic encounters were to take the form of denudification whereby people disclose themselves to one another equally and substantively, such encounters will remain truncated and possibly become even more prejudiced towards exclusion. The point is that, unless people open themselves up substantively to one another, no form of tenable inclusion will ensue. We now turn to Giorgio Agamben (2011) for a perspective on denudation with the possibility of people engaging in democratic encounters becoming more open and prepared to take risks.

## **IN DEFENCE OF DENUATION: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AS AN UNCONCEALED DISCLOSEDNESS OF HUMAN SELF**

Nudity, states Agamben (2011, 84), is an image of the human body:

[T]hat is, the trembling that makes this body knowable, but that remains, in itself, ungraspable. Hence the unique fascination that images exercise over the human mind. Precisely because the

image is not the thing, but the thing's knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the thing ... Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the giving of the thing over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the thing: it is the thing itself.

Agamben (2011, 81) introduces the notion of nudity in relation to human action. In his words, 'to know nudity is not to know an object but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing'. In other words, nudity is a condition of 'disclosedness' (*al-letheia*), that is, 'unconcealment' without which knowledge would not be possible (Agamben 2011, 81). He clarifies, '[t]he problem of nudity is, therefore, the problem of human nature in its relationship with grace' (2011, 60), because 'nudity is not actually a state but rather an event' (2011, 65), one that 'never reaches its completed form ... it never stops occurring' (2011, 65). This means that there is in fact no such thing as nudity but only denuding. Robert (2013, 121) clarifies that nudity is an eventive apparatus that effected an epistemic passage for Adam and Eve, for whom the knowledge of their denuding was the knowledge of good and evil, described by Agamben (2011) as 'the only content of their knowledge of good and evil is, therefore, nudity'. To Robert (2013, 121), nudity exposes knowability. Denuding, therefore, does not expose an object of knowledge but a potentiality for knowing: 'What denuding reveals is revealability, which is a potentiality – one that is never actualized and, so, never manifested in or as revelation' (2013, 121).

What follows is that, unless people engage with nudity in democratic encounters, the possibility that they would learn from one another would be very unlikely. Again, nudity or denudation is a condition of 'pure visibility and presence' whereby no secret is concealed (Agamben 2011, 81). So, for Agamben (2011, 84, 86), the nudity of the human body is its image of an unveiled appearance which is 'infinitely free of secret' – an appearance that exhibits its own vacuity and that allows the inapparent to take place. Put differently, nudity or denudation 'lets the absence of secrets be seen', which means it expresses only a 'letting-be-seen' (Agamben 2011, 89). When nudity unveils secrets of the human self then a point is reached in which 'clarification is no longer possible' because an appearance has been exhibited 'beyond all mystery and all meaning' (Agamben 2011, 89, 90). In relation to democratic encounters, such a form of engagement is only subjected to denudation when the interaction between humans unveils what is mysterious in the sense that the covert is opened up to humans engaged in the interaction. Here, the unveiling of the strange requires of humans to take risks on the basis of disclosedness and demystification. That is, risk taking increases when the mysterious is on the verge of being denuded. Moreover, when the self experiences moments of denudation where nothing is concealed or censored, where secrets of the self have been

unmasked, democratic engagement becomes open and unrestrained, thus enveloped by a 'pure appearance' or 'absence of secrets' (Agamben 2011, 90). Consequently, the denuded body assumes a new purpose that 'allows the very potentiality that has manifested itself in the act to appear' (Agamben 2011, 102), which, according to Agamben, 'succeeds in bringing together within a single place and in a single gesture both exercise and inoperativity, economic body and glorious body, function and its suspension' (2011, 101–102).

How else can democratic engagement be substantively open if human thought in and about particular situations is not unconcealed or unveiled? The point we are making is that only a demystified form of democratic engagement could deepen the risks humans take to elicit unconstrained encounters where nothing is held back and where human thought has been made transparent and accessible to all others. Furthermore, the possibility that human action can unveil mysterious meanings that could enhance people's interactions (and, by implication, their risk taking) would only contribute towards humans' intimacy, in other words, their knowability (nudity) in sustaining unconstrained forms of democratic engagement.

To take a risk is tantamount to disclosing something that would otherwise have remained concealed. So, when one takes a risk, one divulges (unveils) what would otherwise have remained veiled or held back from others. Unveiling one's nudity is therefore an act of exposing what would otherwise have remained covered. Hence, to take a risk implies denudifying oneself. Inasmuch as risk taking is associated with disclosing oneself, so the Agambenian notion of rhythm (cf. Agamben 2004) is linked to a visible presence that assigns to a nude image its 'flows in time', that is, its 'movement' (Agamben 2004, 99). For Agamben, this movement or 'eternal flow' of rhythm gives to risk taking 'a stop, an interruption in the incessant flow ... [that] gives and reveals the particular status, the mode of presence proper to the work of art [nude image] or the landscape we have before our eyes' (Agamben 2004, 99). Agamben goes on to assert that being 'arrested' by nudity means 'both to hold back, to suspend, and to hand over, to present, to offer' (Agamben 2004, 100). What follows from the aforementioned, is that like risk taking, rhythm 'gives and holds back' (Agamben 2004, 100). So, when a nude image presents itself to others it gives and holds back. Nudity is therefore subjected to a rhythmic movement of disclosure and retention. Put differently, denudification involves a rhythmic flow of movement whereby the image presents itself to the one witnessing the image, in other words, the image is disclosed or unconcealed to others. Concomitantly, with the unveiling of the nude image, the witnesses to the image look at what is discernible with moments of imperceptibility, as if the nude image is at times not visible because of an interruption encountered due to that with which the witness is confronted.

This brings us to the question: What is the implication of rhythmic risk taking for democratic engagement?

## DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AS RHYTHMIC RISK TAKING

Thus far, we have shown that democratic engagement is not merely associated with enframing people's collective existence, it is rather also an enlargement of people's moral perspectives 'in virtue of their humanity *simpliciter*' (Benhabib 2011, 75). And, as per Gutmann and Thompson's (2004, 178) argument, democratic engagement is explicitly concerned with people seeking moral agreement when they can engage in and/or about public policy through deliberation, and 'maintaining mutual respect when they cannot [reach agreement]'. But, as we have also shown through Agamben's (1994) conception of denudation, nudity is subjected to a rhythmic movement of disclosure and retention. In other words, while humans are prepared to reveal themselves inasmuch as they are disinclined to do so, much of the decision to reveal or to conceal is taken from the engagement that one human being meets in the other. The rhythm of this encounter, therefore, is subject to how one presents the image, and then how the other witnesses and responds to the image. In this sense, like denudification, democratic engagement takes on a rhythmic flow of movement whereby one human being unveils him/herself to the other, while the other witnesses and responds. Without the witnessing or the rejoinder, the engagement cannot be described or understood as such, because an engagement necessarily implies the presence, meeting or involvement of another. In other words, if a democratic engagement is to occur, then the act of unveiling or revealing oneself to the other has to be met by a response. To our minds, this engagement is best understood as a rhythmic movement because engagements are neither fixed nor pre-determined. How does one know how the other might respond if one should reveal oneself? This is the inherent risk within the act of denudification or unveiling – one human makes him/herself known to the other but he or she cannot know how the other might respond. If the response is not reciprocal, or is one of concealment, then the one who has initiated the unveiling might be inclined towards re-concealment and withdrawal from the engagement. But how else might democratic engagements unfold, if one is not prepared to risk the unexpected, the improbable, and even the chaotic?

In *The man without content* (2004), Agamben explains that the status of a human's dwelling on earth is a practical one, because of his or her productive status, i.e. he or she developed from non-being to being, and from concealment into the light of work or production. To Agamben (2004, 43), the presupposition of work is 'bare biological existence, the cyclical

processes of the human body, whose metabolism and whose energy depend on the basic products of labor'. To Agamben, a conception of work (doing) is so intimately tied to the biological cycle of humans that any attempts to argue differently have always returned to an interpretation of life, of man as a living being in which the philosophy of man's 'doing' continues to be a philosophy of life (2004, 44). Everything, says Agamben (2004, 58), is rhythm, '[T]he entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm, just as every work of art is one rhythm ...'. Rhythm, says Agamben, is not structure, but is instead the principle of presence that opens and maintains the work of art in its original space. Paradoxically, he explains, it is neither calculable nor rational; yet, it is also not irrational. The essence of rhythm, he continues, is to flow, as in the case of water, or a musical piece, which flows, and then stops. As such, says Agamben, '[w]e perceive rhythm as something that escapes the incessant flight of instants and appears almost as the presence of an atemporal dimension in time' (2004, 62).

In his analogy between music and art, Agamben (2004) states that rhythm is something that escapes an 'incessant flight of instance'. If something does not appear incessantly and/or instantaneously, it actually appears rhythmically, in other words, there is a moment of holding and giving back as one might listen and be moved by the crescendos of music. Agamben's (2004) argument is that in the same way that we listen to music, we look at art where we experience a suspension in time in which we reflect on the painting and re-depict the image as the painting reveals itself. In Agambenian fashion, beholding a work of art is not a static action, but rather ecstatic. 'It means ecstasy in the epochal in the opening of rhythm which gives and holds back ...'. In this sense, we compare a democratic encounter to an opening of rhythm in which one reveals one's thoughts momentarily, and then holds back as one waits for a response. To our minds, then, democratic engagement as rhythmic action, firstly, counters the idea that democratic engagement is expected to be linear or ordered. As an action which might be forthcoming (unveiled) or not (concealed), one becomes aware that democratic engagement can take on forms of openness or disorderliness, inasmuch as it might retreat towards concealment or secrecy. Secondly, democratic engagement as rhythmic action speaks to the very human composition of being human, that is, humans are in a perpetual condition of movement and cycles. Their natural state, therefore, is that of being in rhythm. To expect, therefore, that humans are naturally inclined towards that which is linear and pre-empted is not only to discount the natural state of human rhythm, but it is also to be inattentive to the unexpected and the unexplored, which ought to constitute democratic engagement. Finally, when a human reveals his or her nude image (denudification), he or she exposes both his or her knowability of him/herself, as well as his or her potentiality for knowing. In other words, through engaging

with others, by unveiling him/herself, he or she shows his or her willingness to make him/herself known to others, so that others might make themselves known to him or her. Through a form of democratic engagement, which assumes a form of denudation, the possibility is always there that human action will be enacted through an unveiling of the self that is infinitely free of secret. In turn, a denudified democratic engagement as rhythmic holds the potentiality of unconstrained and unrestricted movement of human engagement, because it is naturally synchronised to what it means to be human.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. 2004. *The man without content*. Translated by G. Albert. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. 2011. *Nudities*. Translated by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Benhabib, S. 2011. *Dignity in adversity: Human rights in troubled times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gutmann, A. and D. Thompson. 2004. *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hansen, D. T. 2011. *The teacher and the world: A study of cosmopolitanism as education*. London: Routledge.
- Robert, W. 2013. Nude, glorious, living. *Political Theology* 14(1): 115–130.