A Reflection on “Democracy with All the Feels”

By Thalsa-Thiziri Mekaouche

Hope, anger, disappointment, empathy, love. What do these feelings have to do with democracy? Hyper-rationalist political scientists believe that human beings act based on logical trade-off calculations. For these thinkers, the complex mosaic of emotions is at best insignificant, and at worst, an impediment to judicious policymaking. Think of angry voters who bring populists to power, in some cases seeking to dismantle social services and minority rights. Think of disappointed citizens who do not even vote anymore, thereby undermining the democratic mandate heads of government use to establish the legitimacy of their policies.

In a hyper-rationalist mindset, the “citizen who feels” is objectively worse than the “citizen who thinks.” Under this framework, voters act irrationally and are guilty of jeopardizing democracy. Responsible politicians should endeavor to “de-emotionalize” public discourse and dampen this dangerous sensitivity.

Yet, while the hyper-rationalist conception seeks to make emotions irrelevant, it appears increasingly out of touch. It fails to explain the role of emotions in our current democratic crisis, beyond a simplistic condemnation of angry voters, who also happen to be the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups. It also fails to acknowledge the opportunities of harnessing both positive and negative feelings to bolster democracy.

To develop an understanding of the politics of emotions and discover the potential of human sensitivity in democratic systems, Yale’s Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS) hosted “Democracy with All the Feels,” a conference spearheaded by Hélène Landemore, professor of political science; Antonin Lacelle-Webster, ISPS postdoctoral associate; and Théophile Pénigaud, MacMillan Center associate research scholar. Over the course of four panels, political scientists shared their findings on the politics of emotions, shedding light on the transformative power of human feelings in democratic thinking.

Taking it All

The hyper-rationalists in political science may throw a condescending look at those who focus on the "politics of emotions" and treat them as naïve interpreters of nonsensical feelings. But "Democracy with All the Feels," as its title indicates, was everything but an exercise in idealization. It tackled *all the feels,* giving special attention to negative emotions and their detrimental effects on democracy.

Emblematic of this comprehensive approach, Indiana University's Steven Webster explored the rise of schadenfreude, when citizens feel a sadistic sense of pleasure at the suffering of their political adversaries. Schadenfreude, he argued, is on the rise in the United States and tends to foster dehumanizing public discourse. Political adversaries become enemies. Hate develops between citizens who don't feel like they belong to the same political community.

Molly Scudder from Purdue University addressed cynicism, and Yuna Blajer de la Garza, from Loyola University, addressed indifference. Though seemingly less harmful than schadenfreude, these two negative attitudes have sweeping effects on democracy.

Scudder described cynicism, a chronic distrust affecting both interpersonal relations and democratic institutions as a contagious phenomenon. Cynicism reduces citizens' ability to feel empathy toward others and leads them to retreat from politics, into de-politicized personal spheres.

Blajer de la Garza showed that counterintuitively, successful democracy can generate widespread civic inertia. Relatively well-functioning institutions and a commitment to transparency reduce incentives to public participation, she said. Citizens grow accustomed to the belief that their involvement is not necessary. She warned against interpreting indifference as an innocuous phenomenon, citing Antonio Gramsci: "What comes to pass does so not so much because a few people want it to happen, as because the mass of citizens abdicate their responsibility and let things be."

This lucid conversation on negative feelings provided a fascinating — definitely not naive — lens through which to examine the current democratic crisis. But analyzing these negative feelings is not enough. We must devise ways to break the vicious circles of anger, schadenfreude, cynicism and indifference. This is why Scudder proposes deliberative democracy as a way to inoculate our political system against the destructive effects of widespread distrust. Similarly, Blajer de la Garza advocates for injecting a "dose of political realism" into our democratic institutions to keep citizens aware that

democracies, even seemingly well-functioning ones, are nothing without the active participation of their citizens.

Janus-Faced Feelings

Citizens can rejoice in the sufferings of their political adversaries, and they can embrace cynicism and indifference. These are unambiguously negative feelings, but more nuance is necessary to understand the tapestry of human emotions and their role in democratic systems. Sometimes, hope is tainted with fear while disappointment can become a source of empowerment. Katie Stockdale's research on hope in the context of climate change and Meena Krishnamurthy's exploration of democratic disappointment in the context of the civil rights movement both center around the idea that feelings are Janus-faced. This concept, named after the Roman god of time and new beginnings who had two faces, suggests that emotions can have dual aspects.

Stockdale, an associate professor at the University of Victoria in Canada, started investigating feelings after a previous iteration of this conference at ISPS. Interested in the life-changing consequences of climate change, she posited that hope to escape from the threats of climate-induced disasters, such as floods or wildfires, is a negative hope. She calls this fearful hope a tainted form of aspiration, with tangible ramifications on the way governments tackle climate-related loss and damage. If someone feels this type of fearful hope, she argues, hearing a government official cast climate change in terms of global action and an opportunity-multiplier may create dissonance. Instead, she encouraged increased awareness of the nuances of hope, particularly in a context of acute crisis.

Another panelist, Karen Celis from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, proposed to design new forms of institutions that can account for these feelings in decision-making.

If hope is not always positive, the flip side reveals that feelings with negative connotations, such as disappointment, may be cast in a more positive light. This is precisely what Krishnamurthy, from Queen's University in Canada, set out to do in her paper "From Shattered Dreams to Dreams in the Making: Martin Luther King, Jr. on Transformation Through Democratic Disappointment and Determination." Instead of rejecting disappointment, she said we should momentarily embrace it, not only as an inherent part of human life, but as a source of dogged determination. A sense of discontent, she argued, prompts reaction and civic participation as when King harnessed the power of disappointment through collective practices, such as prayers and chants.

Celebrating

“Democracy with All the Feels,” was also a celebration of human feelings.

Michael Morrell from the University of Connecticut, Lala Muradova from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom and Michael Neblo and Nathalie Miller of Ohio State University, explored the potential of empathy in democratic systems. For Morrell, the current democratic crisis can be addressed with more empathy among citizens, not less empathy. For Muradova, empathy toward future generations, which she intends to foster by creating an educational video game on climate action, can be harnessed to create support for environmental policies.

Michael Neblo and Nathalie Miller also explored the potential of technology to expand the boundaries of empathy. Using artificial intelligence, they facilitated perspective-taking during deliberation processes. Chatbots proposed “bridging statements” that aim to bring participants closer to understanding the perspectives of others and finding common ground, if not necessarily fully adopt opposing opinions. However, they cautioned that technology, especially artificial intelligence and social media, must be used with caution. Jennifer Forestal’s work on the affective structures of social media showed how digital deliberation spheres can be hijacked by the spread of hateful speech toward women or minorities. At the same time, she also found instances where members of online communities had created powerful self-regulatory mechanisms in which hateful speech was immediately condemned and curtailed.

Antonin Lacelle-Webster presented his work: “Collective Hope and Democratic World-Making,” shedding light on what hope can do for democracy as a space for collective imagination and undertakings. Using the powerful Arendtian emphasis on possibility, he argued that hope is not other-worldly but grounded in political life. Hope is action, he said. It is promise-making. It challenges exclusionary frameworks and provides an avenue for co-constructing possible democratic futures.

The conference ended with the rehabilitation of love as a feeling that matters in democracy. Yes, love. Not affection, not amiability, but love. In “The Power of Love: Civic Friendship and Its Effects in the French Citizens’ Assembly on End-of-Life Issues,” Hélène Landemore presented empirical findings from her experiences in citizens’ assemblies. She reported instances where citizens — complete strangers to one another before the start of deliberation — declared publicly that they loved other members of the assembly. The most striking aspect of this finding lies not in the characterization of the nature of the bonds formed through deliberation, but their instrumental role in deliberation itself.

Love held citizens' assemblies together when disagreements occurred. It fostered what Habermas, German philosopher and social theorist, called the "forceless force of the better argument" and de-activated cynicism, a feeling, which as we have seen through Molly Scudder's work, jeopardizes democracy itself. Landemore called for political scientists, politicians, and citizens themselves to take a fresh look at love. She broadened our understanding of love, not as a private feeling, restricted to family and friends, but as a binding force for democratic systems. This force can best flourish in deliberative settings, where citizens face each other and learn that the "other," this citizen with whom they thought they had nothing in common, is also a part of themselves.

Baby Steps

This conference, generously supported by ISPS's conference funding initiative and its Democratic Innovations program, sought to plant the seeds for a more ambitious research agenda on the "politics of emotions." Perhaps because it decided to approach feelings without contempt or idealism, the audience and panelists had a particularly fruitful exchange.

In a lovely confluence of theme and parenting practicality, one of the panelists had her toddler with her. In a setting where emotions were not the adversary of reason, where individuals were taken as they are — as human beings — it was no surprise that this toddler was well cared for. Not only by his mother, but also by other conference participants, who volunteered their laps for naps while his mother presented her work and received feedback.

This conference may not be representative of the brutal politics roiling the country today. But it embodied why attention to feelings and the celebration of empathy, love, and hope may offer a worthwhile alternative.