JOURNAL OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Holdo, M. (2025). Caring for Democracy: Feminist Ethics and Radical Democratic Spaces. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 21(1), pp. 1–10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1632

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Caring for Democracy: Feminist Ethics and Radical Democratic Spaces

Markus Holdo

Radical theories of democracy challenge us to consider the significance of various social conditions and practices that affect people's possibilities to engage with social injustices. However, they still tend to obscure how political spaces are possible in the first place. How are, for instance, spaces of deliberation or agonistic contestation created and sustained over time? How do people enter them and become recognized as participants? Building on works of feminist care ethics, this paper suggests 'caring for democracy' as a distinct democratic practice alongside more widely recognized practices, such as engaging in public deliberation or disruptive protests. It includes acts that help maintain a shared space—both physical and social aspects of its construction—and involves caring for everyone's equal possibilities to participate in and reconstitute the space to reflect their needs and desires. Based on the recognition of difference, caring for democracy includes addressing material inequalities and power relations, checking in with others, and making space for them to express their views. The paper specifies the relationship between care and other democratic practices and addresses what caring for democracy should mean in an unjust world where uncaring and undemocratic actions undermine democratic spaces.

Keywords: care; feminism; democracy; deliberation; contentious politics; assemblage

Introduction

Feminist critiques of theories of democracy have shown that they tend to obscure or downplay various preconditions of democratic practices (e.g., Bargetz 2009; Fraser 1990; Pateman 1988). A democratic space needs to be constructed, and people must come and participate. Who creates such spaces? Who asks people to come, and who attends to their needs? What negotiations over other responsibilities at home and elsewhere make it possible for some to join? Is the space constructed in ways that allow everyone to enter, be present, and participate equally? Is it created and maintained to reflect differences of race, gender, class, physical and cognitive abilities, and sexuality? What else does a shared public space require?

In their work on a performative theory of assembly, Judith Butler notes that political action presupposes squares and streets on which people can assemble. Human action 'is always supported action' (Butler 2015: 72). Countless acts must be carried out, and myriad things must be there for anything political to happen. Yet, it has been common practice to leave such acts and things unrecognized, just as 'when male citizens enter into the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war, and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted as the architecturally bounded theater of their speech' (Butler 2015: 72). Hannah Arendt, for example, argued that political action required the 'space of appearance', but did not address the question of what that space needed in turn. Somewhere, it all needs to begin. Butler argues that the public square presupposes bodies and materiality. So do spaces that are constituted by radical democratic imaginaries. They can only exist and continue if someone provides the numerous things that theorists of politics, deliberation, and social movements have taken for granted—things regarded as private, not public or political, that, therefore, have had no place in their theories. Unlike many public figures and theorists of democracy, many people recognize and attend to the preconditions of democratic spaces. Otherwise, such spaces would not exist, and even if they did, no one would be able to participate in them.

Building on this feminist argument, I want to examine the practice of recognizing and attending to what a radical democratic space needs. Public spaces (where people appear in public and receive publicity) can exist only so far as something has happened that was not made public (that did not get publicity). The illuminated public square must have been given light—an unrecognized act carried out in the dark. Questions about what is being missed are questions of social justice—*who* built the square, gave it light, invited someone to speak, and sat down to listen? These are also questions of how spaces are shaped and what becomes possible to do there—under whose authority, with what interests, and with recognition of which uses and users of the space? Radical politics requires spaces that are radically different from those that are mainstream or reactionary. Audre Lorde (2012) suggested that we

Department of Political Science, Lund University
Markus.holdo@svet.lu.se

imagine building such spaces with tools other than the ones built to reproduce patterns of domination. To begin anew and create something different together, we need acts of subversion that construct spaces differently so that people can use them differently—acts that reshape how politics is practiced.

Like Butler and Lorde, recent scholarship on democracy has highlighted several ways that social and political circumstances shape possibilities to assemble in public spaces (Alnemr, Choucair & Curato 2020; Bussu & Fleuß 2023; Garcia-Espín 2021; Hernandez-Medina 2010). Drawing on works on the politics of difference and recognition (Benhabib 2021; Fraser & Honneth 2003), social distinctions (Bourdieu 1998), and intersectionality (Collins & Bilge 2020), several recent contributions discuss ways that differences in terms of racialization, gender, class, sexuality, and bodily abilities affect possibilities to participate in spaces shaped by the views and interests of the privileged (Asenbaum 2023; Drake 2021). Several scholars have also made arguments related to practices of inclusion and recognition (Curato 2021a; Garcia-Espín 2021) as well as sketched new visions of democratic practices (Asenbaum 2022; Banerjee 2022; Felicetti & Holdo 2023; Singh 2019). However, something still goes missing (see Drake 2021; Olson 2011). Reviewing the literature's claims regarding inclusion, Marta Wojciechowska (2019: 896) finds that works on new democratic practices are often 'identity-blind'; they do not recognize that who has control of their construction affects who can use them and for what. However, even those who recognize this tend to focus on specific challenges of 'one, separate identity category at a time'. Wojciechowska suggests a series of adjustments that could begin a deeper engagement based on intersectional analysis. Pushing further in this direction, we may ask how, more generally, and with what tools and techniques, people construct more radically different spaces—to be used for radical democratic purposes. How do we conceptualize such acts of construction and how they relate to more widely recognized parts of the performance of democracy, such as deliberation or contestation, that take place in the spaces constructed?

I propose to consider these questions as questions of *care*. A few contributions have discussed the role of care practices in collective protesting and participation, including childcare, healthcare, and caring for each participant's safety (Flesher Fominaya 2020); building collective spaces for practicing solidarity (Holdo 2023, 2025); and thinking intersectionally about participants' needs (Hernandez-Medina 2010; McNulty 2015). Inspired by such experiences, I suggest that we think of 'caring for democracy' as a distinct democratic practice alongside more widely recognized such practices as deliberation and contestation. I build on feminist works on care ethics (e.g., Held 1995; Tronto 2020)—in particular, the critique of how liberal thought and capitalism take for granted and simultaneously neglect forms of invisible labor without which they could not be sustained. These theorists define care as how people act to help maintain and repair our shared world (Tronto 1993). My argument is to extend this theory to practices of caring for shared democratic spaces, which involve creating, maintaining, and repairing relationships of equality, trust, and solidarity, recognizing people's different needs and desires. In the first three sections, I connect the feminist argument for the ethics of care to current debates on practices of deliberation and contestation. I then introduce caring for democracy as a distinct practice and address its possibilities and limits. I aim to explore what caring for democracy means concretely in an unjust world where democratic arenas become dominated by uncaring and undemocratic actors. I end the paper by discussing how this idea of caring for democracy compliments existing scholarship on democratic practices. I suggest that care is one part of a democratic 'assemblage' (Asenbaum 2022, 2023; Felicetti 2021), where it co-exists and has a relationship of interdependence with other practices, including deliberation and contestation, all of which are also valuable in and of themselves.

The Politics of Difference and the Ethics of Care

Iris Marion Young once noted that democratic ideals, especially radical ones, play ambiguous roles in political discourse (Young 2001). On the one hand, ideals such as deliberative democracy direct our thinking and actions toward realizing visions of a different world where we are politically equal. We may or may not find these visions realistic, but such ideals can still enable us to criticize how current practices fall short. On the other hand, however, democratic ideals often do not serve this purpose. On the contrary, they are frequently used to idealize our present practices. They make us not alert but blind to how present practices of democracy, including those currently praised as 'democratic innovations', are biased, co-opted, and prone to produce unjust outcomes. Young maintained that normative theories of democracy could serve as a basis for critique, but she stressed that each theory comes with its specific blind spots.

Recent discussions on intersectionality, recognition, difference, and decoloniality have drawn attention to the privileged views that inform much academic discourse, including on democracy (Banerjee, 2022; Roy, 2009; Singh, 2019; Taylor, 2019). For example, Anna Drake (2021: 177) argues that deliberative democracy alone cannot accomplish greater inclusion where people are marginalized because if the call for greater inclusion takes place in deliberation, it occurs in spaces shaped by practices of exclusion. Thus, attempts to make spaces more inclusive may distract from more effective ways to contest the terms of deliberation outside deliberative spaces. Similarly, several scholars have argued that deliberation may trap the marginalized in spaces where their claims will not be heard and understood (Olson 2011). Some take this critique even further, suggesting that the imperative that people must be involved in something called 'public deliberation' is itself problematic, as it assumes normative distinctions between a particular form and practice of democracy and other social actions that people engage in, which are then, by implication, do not qualify as 'public' or not 'deliberative' (e.g., Fraser 1990; Holdo 2015; for a critique of this idea, see Owen & Smith 2015). Current theorizing on democracy seems increasingly reluctant to

take these distinctions for granted (see, e.g., Mendonça, Ercan & Asenbaum 2022), with some scholars proposing conscious 'concept-stretching' to expand the meaning of deliberation (Felicetti & Holdo 2023) and making room for addressing people's personal everyday lives (Holdo & Khoban 2024).

These discussions point to the need to continuously engage with some of the constitutive assumptions of deliberative democratic theory even if, by now, few scholars in the field defend them (see Bächtiger et al. 2018). The increasingly shared critique of these assumptions also challenges scholars to recognize and examine acts that have tended to go unnoticed, in particular mundane interactions in which we reproduce or subvert power relations and political discourses, establish expectations, norms, and responsibilities, in ways that enable and constrain people's possibilities to take part in deliberation. Moreover, the critique is also relevant to other ideas and practices of democratic politics. For example, contentious politics, too, rests on enabling and constraining conditions—the construction of streets and squares, people's availability to participate, and their social connections, trust, and confidence. Thus, both deliberation and protesting assume that we resolve some issues before entering a shared space.[1] Not addressing these preconditions allows the privileged, as Young would argue, to proceed with their deliberations and protests *as if* the spaces for these practices were equally open to all.

The idea of care as a democratic practice recognizes the significant challenge of practicing inclusion in ways that acknowledge difference and interdependence. It is a practice of creating, maintaining, and repairing spaces where we can come together. It involves caring not only for the space itself but for everyone's presence and participation on terms not set by the privileged but reflecting our differences. Such terms, moreover, must not be rigid but possible to change. Before discussing 'democracy care' in more detail, I turn to the limits of deliberation and contentious politics to show the distinct value of a care approach and how it relates to other practices of democracy. My argument is not that deliberation and contestation are flawed practices or theories of democracy. Instead, at the end of this paper, I suggest approaching different ideas of democracy as adding to an assemblage of democratic practices, where care is one part, alongside deliberation and contentious politics. The latter two are not good starting points for addressing differences. While contentious politics does a better job than deliberative theory in addressing unequal conditions for participation in politics, and while deliberation is a way to take responsibility for the spaces where we come together to explore what we want to do collectively, neither of these practices of democracy helps to address the preconditions for political action.

The Limits of Contentious and Deliberative Politics

Contentious politics and public deliberation are often treated as two mutually constitutive practices of democracy (Olson 2011; Calhoun 2010). While various theorists also treat them as having mutually *exclusive* rationales or orientations (Cohen & Rogers 2003; Habermas 1996; Young 2001), empirically, these practices of democracy often appear together, and democratic activism arguably requires an ability to combine them (Mendonça & Ercan 2015; Olson 2011; see also Fraser 1990). By 'contentious politics', scholars mean the employment of disruptive tactics to call something taken for granted into question or try to change people's views on a policy issue (following the convention of social movement scholars, I use this term interchangeably with 'political contestation'; see Tilly & Tarrow 2015). It is often a more viable path for questioning and resisting because it is the practice of saying no, withdrawing cooperation, and sometimes making our conditions for future cooperation known (see Hayward 2020). In Piven and Cloward's work, it is precisely the withdrawal of cooperation that is essential to contentious politics. Even citizens without significant political or economic resources can use such withdrawal to force the powerful to renegotiate power relations (Piven & Cloward 2012).

Because this mode of politics is, per definition, disruptive, direct, and strategic, it has often been seen as not just different from but also contrary to, and incompatible with, deliberative politics. Recent contributions have challenged this view, suggesting that forms of disruptive action are often crucial for initiating deliberation on neglected issues (e.g., Curato 2021b). Others have added that contentious politics usually involves various moments of deliberation as it requires mobilization, coordination, and communication with the rest of society (Felicetti & Holdo 2023). Thus, contentious politics is often more than disruptive; it usually involves questioning assumptions and idealizations of present practices of democracy and inventing new ones that correct these. In this way, contentious politics may contribute to a better-maintained and deepened democracy.

Contentious politics is thus often more than disruptive, sometimes involving extensive deliberation (and, as I will argue, care). Similarly, public deliberation is usually more than 'deliberative'. Following Owen and Smith (2012), we can define as deliberative any action that expresses a 'stance' of, or 'orientation' toward, mutual understanding. Deliberative theorists regard this orientation toward mutual understanding as the basis of conversations that can generate democratic legitimacy (e.g., Bohman 2000). Some scholars have considered its relationship with contentious politics temporal, with deliberation taking place as people have cooled down and decided they want to do things together even if they have differences (e.g., Fung 2005). *Before* this can happen, disruptive actions are legitimate and may contribute to the possibility of subsequent deliberation. Other scholars see the relationship in spatial terms, with contentious politics being the 'outside' of deliberation (e.g., Olson 2011). While closely related, democratic theorists want to keep them distinct (see also Cohen & Rogers 2003; Fung 2009). But this is not necessarily because the two cannot occur together. Nor do they necessarily occur in separate spheres. On the contrary, theoretically and empirically, they appear together but as two actions distinguished in terms of what we find valuable about them. They appeal

to us for different reasons: one disrupts our habitual ways of thinking and doing things; the other makes it possible for us to understand each other and agree. Consequently, these different kinds of actions need to be evaluated differently: we should expect protests to disrupt, not necessarily make us wiser about others' views and ideas, and we should expect deliberation to help us understand each other while not being the best way to call into question the assumptions on which our collective reflections begin and proceed. Both types of action need to be available to people since deliberation alone can become oppressive without the possibility of withdrawal, and contestation may lead to escalating conflict without the possibility of healing through communication oriented toward mutual understanding.

Thus, while public deliberation and political contestation appear empirically together and citizens often engage most effectively by combining them, they are distinct regarding underlying orientation. The ways these two types of action are different also indicate why neither is a self-sufficient practice of democracy. Both depend on other practices to be sustainable. Contentious politics cannot be the way that we lay the foundations for protests to take place. It requires something that contentious action cannot provide because it is not how we form the relationships of trust that make collective action possible. Conversely, deliberation is usually not the most effective way to address power relations and ideological biases that can make deliberation oppressive.[2] It depends on other types of action to function well.

Care as a Democratic Practice

Realizing radical ideas of democracy requires social conditions that are unaccounted for. In a recent contribution to democratic theory, Mendonça et al. (2024: 342) highlight how the recognition of vulnerability, closely connected to the interdependencies that feminist theorists of care emphasize, 'allows one to ask what kind of resources, types of support, or redistributive policies are necessary for a political institution or process to be open to change, thereby risking the status quo to establish new, fairer, and more egalitarian social conditions'. Such support or redistribution policies can be part of an ethics-of-care approach to democracy. Most obviously, perhaps, for people to be engaged in debates, collective reflection, and protesting, someone must be making and preparing our food, taking care of the children, the sick, and the elderly, maintaining our public parks, and repairing our streets. These are forms of care without which a society would not be sustainable. Feminist scholars have addressed how these forms of care are systematically devalued and caretakers marginalized in capitalist economies. Extending this claim to caring for democracy, I want to focus on invisible labor specific to democratic politics. Just as feminist works have brought attention to the ways societies depend on taken-for-granted and often unpaid care work, democratic theorists ought to pay more attention to the everyday politics of caring for democracy. Like other forms of care work, caring for democracy is situated in power relations, where some benefit more than others, some do most of the care work needed, and some counteract care through uncaring acts that undermine shared spaces. That these dynamics are situated in power relations means that the roles people take and receive depend on status differences in intersecting relations of oppression, such as those based on gender, race, sexuality, disabilities, and class.

Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto define care generally as follows:

> On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Fisher & Tronto 1991: 40).

This broad definition acknowledges that care takes many forms and may be directed at specific people and take place in particular relationships, as well as having broader aims and being carried out collectively. Care is exercised differently in different contexts and cultures. Across contexts and cultures, however, it is distinct from other social practices in that it is oriented toward collective capacities and spaces. It may involve various kinds of action and be directed at multiple aspects of a shared world; what matters is that care concerns the conditions required for other actions to be possible. For example, the ethics of care involves self-care, care for others, and care for our social and physical environment.[3] All these kinds of care are necessary to sustain shared worlds, be it communities, families, friendships, or spaces for democratic engagement (see Lorde 2017: 130; Tronto 2015: 34).

Thinking of care as a democratic practice means extending the feminist argument for an ethics of care and its focus on caring for our shared world, the people that inhabit it, and the environment to acts of caring for shared spaces where people come together to deliberate, protest, and make decisions. A few recent contributions have introduced the concept of care to democratic theorizing by suggesting that care ought to be the substance of democracy (Tronto 2013, 2020; Urban & Ward 2020). The argument is that care practices—from health care, child care, and elderly care to support networks and caring for the environment—are so essential for social life that they should be center stage in a democracy. My aim here is related but different. I want to focus our attention on forms of care directed at democracy itself. Like other care work, it ought to be recognized as the central realm of politics. Caring for democracy involves caring for everyone's equal opportunity to participate and for the spaces in which we participate; there needs to be a forum, and people need to be able to come to it and act in it.[4]

Standard criteria of democracy do not mention that democracy requires care work, nor that it rests upon assumptions about 'private' lives that citizens can and should politicize (e.g., Dahl 1991). By contrast, more sociological analyses of participatory practices have often highlighted how people's possibilities of participating

are conditioned by their social relations, families, work, economic status, and other forms of capital, and the patterns of inclusion and recognition in their society (see García Espín 2021, 2023; Hernández-Medina 2010). Radical theorists of democracy have acknowledged this, too. Still, as several critics have pointed out, they rarely engage with the implications of such differences on how we may need to reinvent, or at least revise, ideas about democracy (see Cohen & Rogers 2003; Drake 2021; Hayward 2004; Olson 2011; Young 2001). If care, in general, refers to everything people do to maintain and repair a shared world (Tronto 2013), then *caring for democracy* is, more specifically, what we do to create, support, and repair spaces in which we together discuss and make decisions about what we want our society to be like. Caring for democracy refers to all the creative, subversive, and loving ways that people reach out to each other and form relationships of trust, lay down some shared norms of respect, and share valuable stories of community, justice, solidarity, and liberation. These are forms of 'everyday politics' (Collins 2020; Mansbridge 2013). Without these acts, no meaningful practice of democracy would be realized—no one would vote, respect the law, or be engaged in protest.

In the previous section, I argued that deliberation and contestation depend on one another since neither would serve democratic ends independently. Deliberation would become oppressive; contestation would lead to endless conflict. Moreover, neither of these practices is particularly good at helping construct the basis of political action as such. Deliberation helps us talk about that basis, and contestation helps disrupt it. But what creates and maintains it is care. I argue, therefore, that caring for democracy is a democratic practice, just as deliberation and contestation. It is a distinct practice that adds something crucial to democratic politics. In contrast to contentious politics, care is neither disruptive nor strategic. In comparison to deliberation, it is not a process of reaching a legitimate agreement or mutual understanding but of recognizing differences and helping reconstitute spaces of deliberation.[5]

The Politics of Democracy Care: Two Potential Objections

What kind of support does a proposal about another democratic practice require? Normative theories, such as theories of democratic practice, are often said to be abstract by necessity, removed from concrete realities so that they can reach beyond the messy politics and conflicts of the here and now.[6] Feminist theorizing has instead often emphasized the situatedness of all ethical actions. For example, Patricia Hill Collins suggests that ethical commitments cannot be understood without an account of the everyday actions they are said to animate (Collins 2002; Holdo & Khoban 2024). Moreover, works that draw on Simone de Beauvoir's 'ethics of ambiguity' (1962) propose thinking of ethics not as resolving tensions and solving problems but as a practice of facing, acknowledging, and holding paradoxes (Simga 2017; Holdo 2023). Tronto, similarly, cautions her readers not to think of care ethics as another moral doctrine to apply across social contexts. Instead, Tronto suggests considering care as a perspective that broadly shifts our understanding and ways of engaging with various societal problems. Its meaning and application in a specific context must be subject to collective reflection. I suggest two concrete scenarios where the care perspective captures a problem better than other standard views. At the same time, both scenarios point to paradoxes or ambiguities that we cannot fully resolve but need to engage with continuously and together.

Caring for political equality in a neoliberal society

The first problem concerns what care should mean in an uncaring world—where people are increasingly incentivized not to care for each other or our shared world. Various scholars have discussed how neoliberal policies deepen inequalities and structural injustices and undermine our capacity for ethical conversations as citizens (Brown 2015; Fraser 2023). Neoliberalism involves the idea that the market serves as a mechanism for not only achieving political goals but defining them, too, thus making citizen deliberation and questions of care superfluous (Brown 2015; Holdo 2023). In such a political context, does it still make sense to embrace care as a democratic practice? Are the various social activists and street-level bureaucrats who organize meetings, try to make sure those affected show up and feel included, and preserve common spaces by actively occupying them and inviting other citizens to join merely adding to the appearance of democracy as consequential discussions and decision-making take place elsewhere? Will care, as some feminist scholars have objected, help to sustain unjust, capitalist systems as opposed to disrupting them and forcing them to change, as strikes or other forms of withdrawal might? (Arruzza 2016; Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019; Fraser 2016; Holdo 2025).

The question is just as relevant in contexts where the ethics of care is applied to democratic spaces. Citizens' engagement in actions that protect and maintain democratic values and systems have often been conceptualized in depoliticizing terms, such as building trust and tolerance, social capital, and legitimacy (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993). Does the concept of care similarly fail to recognize questions about the politics of 'making democracy work', such as who is doing the care work and who benefits? Like this civic engagement literature, does it fail to ask how responsible citizens may respond to existing democratic systems' failures to include citizens on equal terms and hold decision-makers accountable? What does it mean to practice care, more specifically, in a society where policymakers are making more and more room for investors to influence decisions at the expense of citizens and where people are encouraged to think narrowly about the consequences policies have for them individually as opposed to how they affect us collectively? What does it mean to help maintain, continue, and repair our shared world when that world seems increasingly uncaring? Does caring help sustain uncaring practices rather than disrupting them and pressuring policymakers in a different direction?

There is no simple answer to these questions. However, we can begin addressing them by noting that

care is a political act in its own right. While it cannot compensate for a lack of political contestation, just as it cannot compensate for an absence of deliberation, care is required for either of such actions to take place at all. Moreover, caring is a stance of resistance and insistence on something that contrasts and opposes neoliberal ideas and policies. It helps sustain our collective spaces, from which people may mobilize for a different political agenda, and provides a broad sketch of an alternative future. At the same time, as a prefigurative, political act, care has its limits. It cannot, alone, bring about a more caring society. It needs to be combined with contestation to disrupt neoliberal thinking and action, and it needs deliberation to coordinate actions and produce collective reflection on alternatives.

Caring for democracy in spaces dominated by the uncaring

A related question concerns caring for democracy when democratic spaces become dominated by uncaring actors. The rise of the far-right, in particular, should raise doubts about whether caring is the most fitting strategy for defending democracy and fighting for a more just world. Part of the early political debate about this phenomenon has been about whether democratic citizens and progressive leaders should be in any form of dialog and conversation with extremists or if such engagement would only legitimize their positions (Lindekilde 2014; Nettelbladt 2023). As far-right parties and candidates have now become part of mainstream politics in many countries, this could be seen as a sign that a soft politics of caring for democracy by listening and responding to far-right arguments and allowing them space in the public discourse has already been tried and that it has failed with disastrous consequences (see Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Mondon & Winter 2021).

The argument is critical, especially since there is a risk of overestimating empathy's role in a progressive response to the far-right (as suggested by, e.g., Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2018).[7] But the ethics of care does not mean blind or unconditional empathy. Care ethics *raises the question* of what it would mean in such a context to care for democracy. However, it does not automatically answer that we must have compassion for those who are racist or indifferent to others' suffering. Mary Scudder (2020) has argued that giving greater appreciation to listening practices does not mean asking people to empathize with those whose views and ideas differ from theirs.[8] Similarly, care ethics does not call for radical or unconditional empathy. Nor does the argument for care ethics mean 'turning the other cheek' or 'when they go low, we go high'. As care ethics concerns maintaining, continuing, and repairing our shared world, its focus in this scenario should be those who suffer the consequences of the unjust policies and discourses of the far-right.

Unconditional empathy is not the most caring approach to either uncaring neoliberal policies or uncaring far-right sympathizers. To illustrate this second point, we can imagine interacting with a family member whose actions suggest a deeply uncaring approach to other family members. Caring for a shared world, the family in this case does not necessarily mean responding with unconditional love when a person is acting badly and negligently toward others. Such a response would mean accepting someone who treats the shared spaces others care for carelessly. In such a situation, a caring response that considers one's well-being and the well-being of others—would be clarifying boundaries and reciprocal expectations. It would involve treating the uncaring person as someone expected to show themselves capable of ethical reflection while also being open to listening to their views when expressed respectfully. Caring for democracy in both these scenarios thus means conditioning the care one gives and seeking to renegotiate the terms so that each person benefitting from a shared space participates in caring for it.

Conclusion: Feminist Care and the Democratic Assemblage

I began this paper by discussing the feminist critique of theories of political action that take for granted the existence of shared spaces in which people can practice democracy on equal terms. Like feminist critiques of liberalism in general, this critique points to the need for numerous things and actions that help construct spaces for political action and support people's presence and action in them. I will end this paper by addressing how to think of the place of caring for democracy in the larger perspective of a democratic society. How is it distinct from, and how does it relate to, other practices of democracy?

Previously, scholars have addressed how different practices fit together in terms of an overall democratic system in which these have functions (e.g., Warren 2017). However, recent contributions to democratic theorizing suggest a different path. We need, these contributions suggest, to decolonize (Banerjee 2022), decenter (Holdo 2020b) and democratize (Asenbaum 2022) our understanding of democratic practices, connect acts of different kinds that belong to different democratic imaginaries (Curato 2021b), and re-interpret the meaning of various kinds of acts and their significance for democracy (Felicetti & Holdo 2023; Mendonça, Ercan & Asenbaum 2022). Mendonça et al.'s (2024: 337) argument for thinking in terms of 'deliberative ecologies' is to 'consider the complexity of beings and webs of relationships that condition the emergence of discourses and deliberative transactions in a given context'. The concept of deliberative ecologies also helps examine how these webs of relationships involve relations of interdependence (Mendonça et al. 2024: 334). Similarly, among the various attempts to reconceptualize deliberation in terms of relations, the concept of 'democratic assemblage' has been proposed as a way of imagining democracy as a pluralistic collage where different democratic practices co-exist, relate to each other, change, and vary across contexts (Asenbaum 2022; Felicetti 2021). Asenbaum (2022) highlights how assemblage theory introduces a flat ontology with radically democratic implications for how we think about inclusion and egalitarian practices and research such practices. The image of a democratic assemblage negates epistemic and political

hierarchies—between people and their various kinds of knowledge and between the things and beings being studied (Asenbaum 2022: 6). The parts of an assemblage do not, as in functionalist ideas of democracy, exist to serve other parts or an overarching democratic system. Instead, they are recognized as valuable in themselves, as carriers of different ideas and visions of equality and freedom.

Thinking in terms of an assemblage or deliberative ecology comes from a similar intuition as previous calls for a broadened understanding of how different practices add to a democratic system (Mansbridge et al. 2012). However, these new approaches in democratic thinking do not just suggest moving away from formal institutional contexts to a decentered approach that embraces pluralism in forms of engagement and actors. As Felicetti shows (2021), they differ from systemic thinking in several ways. Felicetti, who elaborates on his way of using the concept of assemblage, points to three ways in which it differs from the systemic approach: first, as opposed to a system, the idea of assemblage does not suggest that the parts are to be understood and valued in terms of their functions, and their instrumental significance, for the whole, but instead encourages us to explore the meaning and importance of the practice on its terms; second, because it has no specific role to play in a broader democratic performance, it is allowed to change and take on new forms depending on contextual changes and differences; and finally, the assemblage image, enables us to move beyond thinking of 'models' or best practices and instead explore the world of democratic practices with curiosity and a willingness to learn from them and allow them to enrich our imagination. The idea of deliberative ecologies, too, seems compatible with these points. Mendonça et al. (2024) use the concept of deliberative ecologies to enable the analysis of complex relations that, in different ways, may structure, facilitate, and constrain the emergence and transmission of discourses and views.

I have suggested that deliberation and contentious politics should be appreciated for what these practices mean for us and how they allow us, respectively, to explore things together and to disrupt and withdraw when collective projects do not seem fair or right. Each mode has its limits, as well. Deliberation is not a way to be disruptive, and contentious politics alone cannot enable us to come together the way deliberation does. In addition, I have argued that neither suffices to address what it takes for granted. Neither, that is, are self-sustained political practices. For people to be included in these practices on equal terms, we need caring practices—listening, recognizing, and adjusting the terms of engagement to make space for other people.

Independently of other practices of democracy, caring for democracy has a distinct value. It captures people's need to be cared for and the desire to care for someone and something. In the democratic assemblage, care is supported by other practices, such as deliberation and contestation. Caring requires deliberation to address a shared interest and concern and disruptive protests when shared spaces do not reflect the views and experiences of marginalized people. Likewise, I have argued these other democratic practices would not be possible, or at least they would not be democratic, without acts of care. The argument for recognizing caring for democracy as a practice is, therefore, an argument for critically reflecting on how exactly radical democratic spaces are created, continued, and repaired.

Notes

[1] In other words, we need to resolve such issues before, as Habermas would put it, we can act as private people coming together as a public (1991: 27).

[2] Some scholars have suggested that power relations and ideological biases can be addressed through deliberation *about* deliberation (or *meta-deliberation*; see Bohman 2000; Dryzek & Stevenson 2011). However, such deliberation, which may lead to recognition of differences in power, do not necessarily resolve these inequalities. Moreover, inequalities will likely affect meta-deliberation, too (Holdo 2020a). Thus, like contentious politics, deliberation requires something that deliberation itself cannot provide.

[3] A point of debate in feminist literature has been the place of self-care. While some dismiss self-care as self-centered and not a form of political action, several theorists, including Joan Tronto (2015) and Audre Lorde (2017, suggest that self-care is an essential part of feminist care ethics. Both Tronto and Lorde stress that care practices risk lead people to overextend themselves in harmful ways, unless these acts are combined with sufficient care for the self.

[4] Jane Mansbridge (1991) used the terms care and nurture three decades ago to suggest that a feminist discourse of democracy could build on ancient Greek ideas that have much in common with contemporary feminism and its evocation of 'social motherhood' and critique of the instrumental reasoning of neoliberal ideology. Similarly, Tronto (2013) has used the term 'caring democracy' to make the argument that we need to shift political discourse from narrow economic growth issues to address the distribution of care-giving and care-receiving in society (see also Urban & Ward 2020). Several other feminist democratic theorists have sought to challenge narrow views of democracy by exploring feminist practices of inclusion, egalitarian decision-making, compromise, negotiation, and deliberation (see Mansbridge 1983; Pateman 1970; see also Phillips 1998). My argument builds on these discussions and suggests thinking of democracy as something that we need to take care of.

[5] Recent arguments for more inclusive conceptualizations of deliberation and contestation may raise the question of whether these concepts do not already include acts of care. However, just as we can distinguish deliberation and contestation from each other in terms of orientation or stance rather than empirical forms of action, care can take various forms even as its orientation is distinct. For example, Felicetti and Holdo (2023) argue for 'reflective inclusion' as a method of recognizing acts as deliberative. However,

while consciously an argument for concept-stretching, this concept does not mean we cannot simultaneously acknowledge other actions as distinct in their orientation.

[6] As Martha Nussbaum writes, 'we cannot justify a political theory unless we can show that it can be stable over time, receiving citizen' support for more than narrowly self-protective or instrumental reasons' (Nussbaum 2007: 1). But as Nussbaum also emphasizes, they need to be responsive to the world and its urgent problems as well. Often the idea has been that a theory proves to be valid and useful to the extent that it helps resolve tensions and solve problems as broadly as possible.

[7] There are several problems with the narrative underlying this empathy argument: it is based on the narrative that the far-right arose as the result of working-class people being 'left behind' and it frames the rise of an authoritarian far-right as a problem of 'polarization'. Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020, 2021) have forcefully refuted these claims. In addition, the empathy argument and the polarization perspective it is based on seem to suggest that those affected are, on the one hand, the far right, and, on the other hand, the progressive left, thereby strangely leaving aside those who suffer the consequences of racist and antidemocratic policies. For various reasons, empathy with the far right seems to be the wrong response for citizens who wish to defend and promote democratic practices. But it is a different question, as I discussed above, whether care has the same problem as empathy in this context.

[8] Scudder argues that better listening is needed to handle growing social divisions and polarization. Significantly, Scudder also carefully distinguishes listening from empathy. Since empathy is based on recognizing oneself in another's experience, it may often reinforce people's unwillingness to hear the other side. I do not necessarily agree with all aspects of Scudder's defense of deliberative theory's emphasis on (and, in my view, idealization of) reason-giving, as opposed to sharing experiences and emotions, but the distinction between empathy and listening is helpful also to distinguish care from empathy.

Acknowledgements
I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for comments, suggestions, and criticism that helped me develop the arguments of this paper. I also thank Andrea Felicetti and Patricia García Espín for discussing a previous version of this paper at ECPR:s annual meeting in Prague, the organizers of the Democratic Innovations section of that conference, and all those who participated in the discussion, especially my fellow panelists, Emma Lancha-Hernández and Iolanda Bianchi. Finally, I thank Sonia Bussu for her excellent work as editor of this journal and for her encouraging and critical feedback on my previous discussions of care and democracy.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Holdo, M. (2025). Caring for Democracy: Feminist Ethics and Radical Democratic Spaces. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 21(1), pp. 1–10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1632

Submitted: 30 May 2024 **Accepted:** 05 February 2025 **Published:** 17 March 2025

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