ESSAY

Agency, Identity, and Community:
Performativity versus Deliberation

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In a podcast discussion with Diana Butler Bass and Tim Whitaker on faith in a toxic public square,[1] process theologian Tripp Fuller answered a listener's question with an extended reflection on culture, identity, and institutions in an increasingly complex world. "It seems that our democracy is having a problem functioning," the listener asked, "and I wonder how a Process/Relational framing helps [us to] think about the predicament of democracy." Though he did not directly reference it as such, his answer engaged the classic sociological dilemma of personal agency versus social structure. Here I extract some excerpts from Fuller's response for reflection on the prerequisites of functional democracy, namely the authentically agentic individual and the authentically deliberative community.

Agency, Identity, Performativity, and Deliberation

> "The nation state and citizens within it are at a point where the challenges outrun our agency…. Democracy isn't just taking a position, but is the art of taking, forming, listening, and reforming solutions across difference. And that means that it's a deliberative process and not a performative one. …The more you recognize a lack of agency, the more your identity becomes performative rather than deliberative….you realize that your own actions don't have traction, don't have grounding, don't have purchase, so you define yourself in a performative engagement with the public square rather than a deliberative one."

Fuller defines democracy in terms of deliberation: "the art of taking, forming, listening, and reforming solutions across difference." Deliberation here implies careful, iterative thought that is open to being challenged by others and, potentially, being changed. Done well, it would include embracing uncertainty and nuance as a part of the process of making an informed decision, and taking steps toward more information and clarity. It would also require an environment in which discussion and debate are low-stakes, where participants are comfortable being persuaded or corrected, and where differences of opinion do not result in

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[1] "Faith in a Toxic Public Square with Special Guest Tim Whitaker of the New Evangelicals", *Ruining Dinner with Diana Butler Bass and Tripp Fuller*, https://trippfuller.com/2024/05/25/diana-butler-bass-tim-whitaker-faith-in-a-toxic-public-square/, accessed May 30, 2024. This discussion starts at 51:25.

creating enemies out of neighbors. Deliberative democracy is an intentional and intentionally communal process of finding solutions to our common problems together; and deliberative actions include thought and reflection, discussion and debate, and expression of the outcomes of that deliberation through actions like voting, making public comment with the goal of persuasion, and living an embodied ethic through careful moral and even consumer choices. Whether or not anyone is watching. (And it is not always clear, when we vote or make ethically driven consumer choices, that anyone notices or cares.) This parallels Jesus' words in Matthew 6, where he says that it's better to give in secret rather than with fanfare: the deliberative and ethical act itself matters more than being praised for it.

Conversely, a performative act is done primarily to be seen doing it, performing an expression of identity. It is not open to discovery or nuance or correction; the act itself is to declare what is, to one's in-group, already self-evident. That said, the self-referential nature of performative politics makes its content–whatever policy or issue it might be–almost irrelevant, as the actual function of the performative act is to signal loyalty to the in-group and to define oneself against the out-group. Performative actions include things like making social media posts proclaiming a position, denouncing an injustice, vilifying a rival, or posing with an influential figure. Such actions often provide immediate feedback in the form of likes and comments, along with a dopamine hit to reinforce the behavior.

The important insight here is that deliberation and performativity are not so much mutually exclusive as they are inversely balanced, with agency as the fulcrum. It's possible to carefully deliberate about an issue and exercise whatever agency is available through deliberative action, and then write a social media post to promote your point of view; it's also possible to engage performatively with an in-group and discover that this group supports communal deliberative democracy through providing learning resources and discussion groups. But by its nature, performativity tends to undermine deliberation, emphasizing the reception of a position rather than the formulation of one; while deliberation turns the focus from the audience to the issue, and inward to ourselves. This makes the balance between them vital.

And yet, performativity is so much more accessible than deliberative communities, and so much easier than deliberative actions, that we have a strong bias toward performativity in this social environment. Performative politics are a form of self-expression to which everyone has access and, through social media, for which everyone has a global platform. Anyone who once shared their opinion at a local coffee shop can now connect to a global in-group in virtual spaces, potentially with a much larger audience and *sense* of agency resulting from it. As self-expression it *is* a form of agency, but it is severely limited in impact; it requires no efficacy or power, and offers little or none. Nonetheless, it *feels* more efficacious than the (very few) deliberative actions that are available to most citizens today. It provides a certainty of being

seen and acknowledged, while deliberation does not; and it requires none of the work of deliberation. It feels like agency, without actually providing any efficacy.

The push to performativity in politics is not just a striving for agency in a system that seems to offer none, it is also a search for identity in a context in which that local coffee shop or even regional or cultural identity means little or nothing to many people. Place-based identities, which are relatively stable and easily shared, have given way to ideological identities which are highly unstable and fluid, often depending on whatever current events are drawing the attention of culture warriors. In-groups on a national or even global scale are defined by a shared position on a cultural or political issue that might reverse next week, depending on how the issue is framed by group leaders; the consistency of the group's position on an issue matters much less than consistency of a member's position within the group. Groups might even hold opposing positions simultaneously, such as a "family values" group that supports a leader known for gross sexual misconduct and lying, or a "social justice" group that opposes the violent oppression of one population while sanctioning violence against another.

Both sides of the culture war are subject to the same challenge: if our primary sense of agency and identity comes from adherence to an in-group that is founded on such unstable positions, there is no room for nuance or self-criticism. Anything less than full support for the in-group threatens one's membership in the group, so the extreme fringes are tolerated or ignored by the in-group while at the same time being centered as representative of that group by the out-groups. Criticism of one group by another therefore focuses on an extreme fringe, the existence of which the group in question cannot even acknowledge, so there is no shared basis for actual debate on these issues. Performativity precludes even the possibility of deliberative action on a societal, or even individual, scale.

Complexity Confounds Agency

Fuller goes on to note that

"the time we need for democratic decision-making is increasing as the world becomes more complex. … There are more things that one would have to take into account, more perspectives and voices, if you're going to do a deliberative process as opposed to a performative one, and those are not the incentives of the public square or the incentives for the individual. … As our culture diversifies and becomes less traditional, where there's not a mono-logic or culture at the center…there's much less that can be assumed or shared when you begin the deliberative process, and that puts increasing demand upon democratic consensus and what it would look like in a deliberative process. … Our agency can't keep up with the challenges. Then throw on it that nation states are now having to decide more and more decisions with an irreversible horizon…be it how

we mess with nukes, how we engage the environment, how we negotiate AI regulation, how we decide about genetic engineering, all of those things have a larger horizon and they deserve more deliberation at the very time, under the nation state, using democracy, [that] the incentive structure is more for performative reflection rather than deliberative."

The complexity of modern life makes true deliberation more demanding. How can average citizens quickly formulate an educated opinion on matters of future scientific and technological impacts, and global ecological and economic systems? The politicization of science morphs fact statements into value questions, which then become the basis of group identity in a hyper-performative virtual public square. The impact of that morphing on our concept of truth and reality has been well documented, though surely not fully understood, but for our purposes here it is enough to say that without an ability to agree on reality there is little basis for genuine deliberation, even more so when effective understanding requires not just a belief in the facts, but enough understanding to grasp their significance and implications. Therefore, the deliberative agency of average citizens is virtually nil, and yet our democratic systems are predicated on an educated voter base capable of deliberation and empowered with genuine (albeit limited) agency. The mechanisms of the system — elections, neutral courts, etc. — continue to operate, but their legitimacy and impartiality are increasingly questioned as they fail to embody or deliver the agency on which they are premised.

Agency and Autocracy

Fuller goes on:

"[W]hat's demanded for a democracy today, to do well given the challenges and pace of stuff, is deliberative; but the incentive structure for culture [and] elections, is increasingly more narrow, so the challenges outpace our agency as individuals and as collectives. And that's killing us. When that's the case, the only thing you can think of is [a] savior complex. … We know we don't have agency to fix this individually or collectively, and the only thing we can think of is someone who is beyond the law and the structures because we don't know what it would look like to do it well."

The rise of autocratic political personalities around the world is a cause for alarm, and poorly understood. The analysis of the rise of Trump in the United States has often been explained as a latent racism reacting to the election of a Black president, or economic inequality and stagnation stoking resentment against elites, institutions, and immigrants. While those accounts may be somewhat true, they have largely failed to provide a satisfying explanation. Part of the picture that is missing is the way that institutions incapable of democratically addressing the complexity of modern issues serve to reduce individual and group agency, even

as those individuals and groups shift from stable and localized identities to unstable and ideology-based identities that depend on performative acts for admittance into the in-group.

Trading Agency for Identity

Even elected officials, who are perhaps the only citizens with significant deliberative agency, are losing their agency as they engage in performative acts in order to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of their voter bases. Deliberation on complex issues requires exploration, reflection, nuance, and being open to changing one's mind, whereas gaining the support of a polarized voter base requires acting out a script that is set by in-groups that compete to determine who will hold power. Fuller notes this in both political and church contexts: "You don't go to a church where you have to work across the aisle, and you don't run in an election where you're fearing the other party; you fear the wing of your own. These kind of things make the incentives for deliberation go down. … [In the 90's and before], the clergy drove political reorientation and the laity followed, but now there's been a shift where the laity are expecting tribal allegiance to be performed by their clergy."

Ironically, and dysfunctionally, the people with the most actual agency (elected officials and leaders) can now only achieve that agency by trading it for membership in an identity group on whom they depend for legitimacy. When the membership, whether of the party or church, determines who will perform deliberative actions on their behalf or lead the group in communal deliberation, and yet their identity is rooted in a process that undermines deliberation at every turn, there is no place left in the system for actual agency.

Judgment and the Prophetic Voice

It is somewhat ironic that perhaps the most performative politics in history were enacted by the biblical prophets, who were known for their dramatic statements of judgment against rulers and nations, sometimes even literally performed in symbolic displays. And yet the prophetic voice of self-criticism in the North American church today seems largely silent, preferring to judge others while making excuses for its own people and faults, the latter couched in the language of grace. The prophets did judge others, but first and foremost they judged their own, calling them back to fidelity to a God who gave equal grace to outsiders and demanded his people do likewise. The prophets used performativity to inspire deliberation, not to undermine it.

Christian lingo can mask the fact that there is little difference between the acts of deliberative democracy and those of discipleship and the spiritual disciplines. The political task of deliberation is the counterpart to the Christian spiritual practice of discernment, a task

traditionally conjoined with confession and repentance, which correspond to reflection and the reformulation of our positions; and reconciliation and fellowship, which correspond to the communal aspects of a deliberative democracy. Being a good Christian, in other words, corresponds to being a good neighbor and citizen; and a reliance on performativity undermines both. Christian virtue is fundamentally deliberative, not performative, and our very identity as followers of Jesus is at stake if we abandon the deliberative for the sake of easy identification with political in-groups and a sense of power.

The current capture of American evangelicals by a political party that takes performative politics to new heights, and in particular leverages performative acts of *faith* through painting Trump with messianic imagery, associating Christian flags with political movements, and even selling a Trump *Bible*, should give every Christian pause. If performativity undermines the kind of agency that forms the basis of community and makes the content of beliefs irrelevant, and also trades agentic efficacy for a feeling of belonging, then the church as a community of believers engaged together in virtue-forming acts of discipleship disappears entirely.

So how do we get it back to actual agency?

Restoring Agency, and Deliberation

If the push toward political performativity (and ultimately autocracy) is rooted in inadequate systems that require we trade our agency for identity, then it is necessary to address two core problems: fixing the system to provide more actual agency, and securing more stable pathways to group identity. Both can be facilitated by a shift back toward the local level, or what sociologists term the meso level of society located between the micro and the macro levels.

In democracy, the more the system scales up, the more political agency is watered down. One vote in a nation of millions has little impact, and savvy political operatives have learned to gather voters into identity groups that they can more easily sway, while voters themselves seek a greater impact by creating interest groups that represent their views. Whether that grouping is initiated by the voters or the campaigners, it serves to create identity groups that simplify issues and eliminate nuance in order to leverage more power. But as outlined above, more group power is not necessarily more agency. Only on the most local levels are individuals and small groups able to exercise agency in a way that expresses their individual or local identity while also exercising true deliberation. Decentralizing decision-making so that those who are closest to an issue have the most direct agency in determining solutions helps to scale democracy down to a level where it can actually function as it was intended: a group decision-making process that involves, as Fuller put it, "the art of taking, forming, listening, and

reforming solutions across difference." In practical terms, that could mean relocating as much power as possible to the municipal level, even to neighborhood or district councils, where every voice can actually be heard.

Having direct influence on decisions, even as small as those decided at a neighborhood level, provides a more robust and deliberative agency as well as a stronger sense of local, place-based identity, which in turn increases stability. Having a local focal point helps us identify with our neighbors, even across difference, rather than sorting ourselves into purely ideological camps in virtual spaces. Practically speaking, that involves some placemaking. Do our communities have "third places"—not home or workplaces—for us to actually interact with our neighbors? Municipal planning decisions determine the kind of community in which we live, and thankfully, urban planning trends are finally beginning to move away from the car-centric suburban sprawl that characterizes most of North America, toward "15-minute cities" in which most daily necessities and services, such as work, shopping, education, healthcare, and leisure can be easily reached by a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or public transit ride from any point.

Unfortunately, land use planning and deliberative, participatory democracy are municipal matters, and citizens tend to pay much more attention to national politics. Yet a shift back to the local is sorely needed to save not only the environment and economy, but democracy as well. How to make that shift therefore becomes an urgent critical question that needs our full agentic communal deliberation.

But we can't miss the fact that all of those suggestions—placemaking and third places, forming a local common identity that tolerates difference, and participating in a community where deliberation (or discernment) shapes our individual and collective actions—are the normal functions of a healthy church. Disentangling churches from national- and international-level performative politics may be one of the most important ways to save deliberative democracy, not to mention personal souls.

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