(In)difference online : the openness of public discussion on immigration

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Chapter 1

Discussing difference in democracy

1.1 Introduction

Many have attempted to start a dialogue between different cultural groups in the Netherlands in the last few years, through initiatives by government, city councils, and non-profit organizations, amongst others. The idea behind this dialogue is that groups in society (in particular natives versus immigrants, and within this latter group, Muslims specifically) are too far removed from one another. Sharing information and getting to know one another would create some sort of understanding and could take away, or at least lessen, the anxiety and tensions that exist between groups. Involving different societal groups in a collective discussion to find solutions to the problems today’s society is faced with could, over time, create a social basis and support for decision-making.

In this chapter, I discuss an account of democratic theory in which public debate is central: deliberative democracy theory. I first discuss the value that this account of democracy attaches to public debate and what this debate should look like. A notion of debate has been developed—deliberation in the public sphere—that is seen as best suited for democracy. However, a number of concerns have been expressed with regard to this notion of deliberation, specifically regarding the inclusion of difference in the public sphere. As this thesis focuses on public debate in polarized societies, I discuss these concerns and address the ways in which exclusion in the public sphere comes about. Subsequently, I present an alternative conception of inclusion of difference in the public sphere: counter publics. Counter publics provide space for marginalized groups to voice their alternative discourse in a separate ‘sphere’. One of the main concerns, however, is how to let different discourses interact with one another, rather than merely coexist in polarized societies. I will therefore introduce another account of deliberation that is open to difference and, at the same time, is focused on the interaction between different discourses in a collective space.

See, for instance, the day of the dialogue in Amsterdam (http://www.amsterdamdialoog.nl), and the ‘broad initiative for social cohesion’ by prime minister Balkenende (Naar nieuwe evenwichten in de samenleving (Towards new balances in society), 2005).
1.2 Deliberative democracy and the public sphere

In deliberative democracy public discussion lies at the heart of democratic society, and includes discussion that takes place at the level of the political elite as well as at the level of citizens. In this view of democracy, the basis for political decisions should lie with these citizens’ deliberations. Citizens constitute the sphere—the public sphere—in which political will is developed and public opinions on matters of common concern are formed (McAfee, 2000: 96). The public sphere constitutes the arena ‘for the perception, identification, and treatment of problems affecting the whole society’ (Habermas, 1996: 301). It is here that ‘new problem situations can be perceived [. . . ,] discourses aimed at achieving selfunderstanding can be conducted [and] collective identities and need interpretations can be circulated’ (Habermas, 1996: 308). The public sphere is not necessarily a space in which immediate results or expert knowledge are produced; it is rather aimed at determining what is ‘generally understandable, interesting, believable, relevant and acceptable, through the use of everyday language’ (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003: 186).

Not every type of exchange within the public sphere is equally successful as a basis of will- and opinion-formation. Rather, the quality of actual formation and the outcome vary according to the way in which proposals, information and arguments are processed (Habermas, 1996: 362). What is important for this process is the means by which a majority is reached, or the quality of the antecedent debates (Dewey, 1954). The notion of ‘deliberation’ portrays the prerequisites and the ways in which discussions should take place in the public sphere. In general, it refers to an open and equal exchange of opinions and rational arguments in which people do not think in terms of their own interests, but let the better argument and the public interest prevail. This exchange then ideally leads to consensus and the ‘common good’ and legitimate decisions in society. Although no agreement exists on which exact elements constitute deliberation as these elements are intertwined, below I address the different elements of deliberation separately, omitting for the sake of clarity the (subtle) differences that exist between accounts of deliberation. I focus on the main elements in deliberative democracy as they have been identified in Habermas’ and related accounts of deliberation, which I will refer to as the traditional or rational account. There are different, alternative accounts of deliberative democracy, a specific strand of which will be addressed in the subsequent sections. In these sections, I focus on the fundamental differences between the rational account and that of theorists stressing difference in society.

First, deliberative democracy theorists argue for inclusion for all. Central is the notion that all those affected by an issue or decision can participate in deliberation:

The political public sphere can fulfil its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among those who are potentially affected. It is carried by a public recruited from the entire citizenry (Habermas, 1996: 365, emphasis in original).

Second, not only should all those affected be included, but they should also be equal within the public sphere. The basis is an egalitarian public of citizens, a society in which
equal rights of citizenship have become effective (Habermas, 1996: 308). The public sphere, thus, cannot be power-ridden and oppressed (ibid: 362). Participation ‘is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and open debate’ (Benhabib, 1994: 31). Deliberative democracy is conceptualised as ‘democratic politics in which decisions and policies are justified in a process of discussion among free and equal citizens’ (Gutmann & Thompson, 2000: 161 (emphasis by author)). The equal status of citizens in deliberative democracy theories is not so much about having preferences equally counted as in aggregative models, but rather about the equal opportunities that citizens have in cooperating in the ‘public process of reasoned decision making’ (Estlund, 2002: 5).

Third is the central idea of communicative rationality: Information and dialogue have to be processed rationally (Habermas, 1996: 362). Citizens have to be open to counterarguments and have the duty to provide reasons for their opinions and convictions (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003: 181). Decision-making is done by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part according to Elster (1998: 8).

This relates to the fourth element in deliberation: transcending one’s own interests by following the rule of impartiality. Citizens should be able to reach an enlightened understanding; they should have adequate and equal opportunities ‘for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen’s interests’ (Dahl, 1989: 112). Public deliberation asks its citizens to transcend their private interests and viewpoints for the sake of common good (Bohman, 1996: 5). Impartiality allows citizens to come to shared ways of thinking about social problems; deliberation then establishes intersubjectivity, the fifth element.

The outcome of deliberation is consensus on the common good. As such, deliberation in the public sphere ultimately leads to more legitimate decisions by the political elite. ‘The procedures of communicative presuppositions of democratic opinion- and will-formation function as the most important sluices for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of an administration bound by law and statute’ (Habermas, 1996: 300). Based on deliberation these decisions are legitimate because citizens argue rationally and listen impartially to reach consensus on what the common good is. The rational debate between equal participants, who are focused on the common interest, ‘shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good’ (Cohen, 2002: 89, emphasis in original).

1.3 Exclusion from and inequality within the public sphere

A number of concerns have been expressed with regard to this account of deliberation. Those relevant for this thesis involve the ways in which the criteria for deliberation in this account are impeding full inclusion of difference and disagreement in democratic society, rather than fostering it. The central question in this thesis is how different positions that
exist in society can come together in public debate. The concerns expressed against the rational account of deliberation focus exactly on this question. A number of concerns were specifically directed at Habermas’ account of the 18th century bourgeois public sphere written in 1962 (translated into English in 1989). Although he has developed his views since then, the objections still remain relevant, as they also address many of the other theorists’ accounts of deliberation and not only Habermas’ conception. These concerns help to develop an alternative account of deliberation, one that more properly allows for the inclusion of difference.

Even though the concerns are interrelated and not mutually exclusive, I discuss them separately here for the sake of clarity. They relate to the suppositions regarding inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus and address the ways in which these criteria impede full inclusion in the public sphere.

Inclusion

Even though deliberative democracy theorists aim at popular inclusion, the notion and suppositions of deliberation may obstruct the fulfilment of this inclusion; according to the traditional account of deliberation, certain voices may be excluded from the public sphere because of the specificity of the rules for discussion.

The strict norms of behaviour in the public sphere run the risk of excluding people; either one has to conform to the rules and setting of the public sphere or be excluded from it. This means that potential participants face a difficult decision: Either they operate according to the conventions, and leave behind the symbolic resources and routines that make their community unique, or they are excluded from the public sphere (Phillips, 1996: 238). This dilemma touches on one of the most prevalent problems of deliberative democracy theory regarding pluralist societies. It creates tendencies that exclude particular voices and homogenize discourse, compelling participants to assume speaking positions located through the practices of dominant groups’ (Asen, 1999: 119).

The possible exclusion of voices and suppression of difference in the traditional account of the public sphere takes place in three ways: through styles, topics, and forums. Stylistic exclusion refers to the way in which certain types of speaking may be favoured over others. Topics may be restricted to matters of ‘common concern’, and a priori distinctions between what is public and what is private. Last, forums can exclude, for instance, through gate keeping in the mass media. Certain criteria, such as timeliness and cogency, determine which discourses are included and which are excluded, as they decide what gets published in the letters-to-the-editor section (Asen, 1999).

Rationality

Another major concern of critics of the traditional notion of public sphere involves the feasibility and desirability of a rational, detached mode of deliberation. This criterion, it is argued, reinforces exclusions based on gender, race, and class (Streich, 2002: 128). Privileging rational argument, ‘an orderly chain of reasoning from premises to conclusion’, might lead to privileging certain groups in society. Favouring ‘articulateness’ and dispas-
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Sianate and disembodied communication means that discussions are often not equally open to all ways of making claims and giving reasons (Young, 2000).

Merely recognizing ‘alternative publics is not enough if they are to be subjected to the decision rules of the rationality that they may well have been formed to challenge’ (Phillips, 1996: 242). If one considers only one form of rationality, there are basically two options available to participants of the public sphere discussions: They can either conform to the ‘rationality of the dominant discourse’ (and thus follow its discursive rules), or they can challenge it. The latter, however, at least in the view of the ‘rational’ public sphere as defined above, will be considered irrational, and thus participants challenging the dominant rationality will face possible exclusion from the public sphere.

As with the other criticisms, the main concern is difference, in this case regarding potential differences in discourse, and what is considered to be rational. Should the dominant discourse determine what is rational, and thus exclude all alternatives to it, or should a normative model of the public sphere include different modes of rationality (other than the dominant rational ones) and allow for alternative types of discourse?

Impartiality

The third criticism concerns the impartiality of participants, the assumption that status differentials can be bracketed and deliberation—as if participants are social equals—is possible. It is argued that the notion of bracketing social inequality is neither desirable nor feasible (Fraser, 1992). It is not desirable as ‘bracketing or sweeping differences under the rug limits the range of public debate and in turn limits our range of solutions’ (Streich, 2002: 131). It is not feasible because needs are always related to some partiality, a specific interest or position. The question is whether there can be such a thing as a ‘neutral discourse through which participants can leave behind their values and partialities to develop some sense of a common good’ (Phillips, 1996: 240). Sanders (1997) argues that it is highly unlikely that citizens can approach one another as equals, as prescribed by deliberative democracy theorists. To ask for impartiality and equality in debate is asking for something impossible and undesirable, as people are not able to leave their identity behind when entering the public sphere. Nor is it beneficial for democracy as politics is exactly about expressing and clarifying one’s own position.

Intersubjectivity

Deliberation is aimed at coming to agreement on political issues by an exchange of reasons that everyone finds compelling, thereby reaching intersubjectivity. But, as Valadez (2001: 41) makes clear, this requirement of deliberation presupposes that participants’ cognitive and moral frameworks are sufficiently similar. The differences in conceptual frameworks may, however, be incommensurable to the extent that fruitful dialogue and reasoned deliberation is impossible (ibid: 42). Young (1996: 122-123) adds that even when the influence of economic and political power is eliminated, this does not mean ‘people’s ways of speaking and understanding will be the same’.

This focus on a common framework ‘reduces our understanding of the diversity of
subjectivities and rationalities that move through and between different frameworks’ (Phillips, 1996: 241). It ultimately marginalizes groups representing a truly alternative perspective. Thus, it is argued, the public sphere should not be all-encompassing in single form, as this would result in ‘filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens’ (Fraser, 1992: 126).

Again, ‘difference’ is central to this criticism. The differences in (particularly multicultural) societies may be so large that there is not enough common ground for mutual understanding of an issue. If this common framework is the starting point, it may lead to a priori exclusion of (radical) alternatives.

Consensus

One of the most prevailing criticisms against deliberative democratic theory in the traditional form is that it aims at reaching consensus about the common good. Many theorists of deliberative democracy view unity or commonness either as the starting point of deliberation or as the outcome of it. But in pluralist societies such a common understanding cannot be assumed, as there are many ‘sources of different social experience and often different interests’ (Young, 2000: 41).

Even if consensus and unity would be feasible, some argue, they are not necessarily desirable. Fraser (1992: 125) raises the question: Would, ‘under conditions of cultural diversity in the absence of structural inequality, (…) a single, comprehensive public sphere be preferable to multiple publics?’ Too much focus on consensus, as well as assumptions on common interest, produce a situation in which it becomes very difficult for people to disagree (Bickford, 1996: 16). A democratic deficit could arise as a result of the ‘sacralization of consensus’ (Mouffe, 2000: 113). Conflict and division are inherent to politics. Deliberative democracy, by negating the ineradicable character of antagonism and through aiming at a universal rational consensus, can lead to ‘violence being unrecognized and hidden behind appeals to “rationality”’ (ibid: 22). In such a view of deliberation, dissent is only seen as ‘a disruption in the inevitable progress toward some transcendent and universal consensus’ (Phillips, 1996: 243). Furthermore, even when dissent is considered to be something productive (i.e., heuristic or corrective), it is still secondary to consensus, as the latter remains the overall aim.

Considering the common good as the outcome of deliberation is considered equally problematic. Definitions of the common good will often express the perspective of the dominant group and narrow the agenda for deliberation, thereby silencing other groups (Young, 2000: 43). In multicultural societies ‘the high level of civic magnanimity and commitment to the common good required by deliberative democracy may be nonexistent or extremely difficult to obtain’ (Valadez, 2001: 41).

Given these problems with the unitary notion of public sphere and deliberation, the challenge for theorists is:

to articulate models of the public sphere that value difference within a common enough framework so that questions of fairness and justice may be broached by par-
ticipants themselves. For this to be the case, difference must be viewed as a resource for—not an impediment to—meaningful dialogue (Asen, 1999: 116).

Taking these points of criticism into account, it is not necessary to aim at finding a single rationality through which to judge all communication in the public sphere. Instead, we should look for different rationalities that underlie different speech acts, as Phillips (1996) argues. Dissent ‘is not the opposite of consent, but rather (…) the boundary site where any consensus struggles against the encroachment of alternative rationalities, arguments, and interests’ (ibid: 244).

These criticisms against inclusion, rationality, impartiality, intersubjectivity, and consensus show the limits of the assumptions of deliberative democracy in a plural society. In this thesis, I focus on public debate in a divided society and examine how different groups that are perceived to be far removed from each other can meet and deliberate in the public sphere. In order to take diversity in society seriously and do it justice, it is crucial to develop a theory of democracy that takes stock of social difference and recognizes the ‘cultural specificity of deliberative practices, and proposes a more inclusive model of communication’ (Young, 1996: 123).

1.4 Aiming at inclusion: Marginalized voices

For voices other than the mainstream to be included in public debate, dissent should not merely be seen as an obstacle, but as inherently valuable to democracy. But how can marginalized groups make themselves heard? One way in which they can voice opinions is in counter publics or, as some say, by having multiple public spheres. The notion of counter publics or multiple public spheres has been developed precisely to do justice to the plurality that exists in society. It provides a space in which groups can discuss political issues within their community of equals, to help them emancipate and formulate their needs and desires. These counter publics form separate publics or public spheres in which not much difference and disagreement is found. Mainly, difference is present with respect to the mainstream public. A counter public does not necessarily have a link to the mainstream public sphere(s). The goal of a public sphere is, however, not just representation in one’s own group, but rather be seen, heard and taken into account within the general public sphere. The problem is how this engagement can take place, and which type of communication enables an engagement between different discourses. Moreover, how can difference and disagreement enter the public dialogue without being seen as mere obstacles that must be overcome? I provide an alternative account of deliberation, informed by the way theories focusing on difference have conceptualized the notion of deliberation. I argue that the one feature that allows for engagement and understanding through public debate in polarized societies is the openness of that debate.

1.4.1 Representation of marginalized groups in counter publics

Access for and representation of all citizens is the basis for an ‘equitable public sphere’ (Kosnick, 2004: 979-980). But the reality is that for many groups, the ideal of such an
open public sphere is difficult to attain, as not all groups and individuals enjoy this access to and representation in the public sphere. Simply stating that these groups are excluded from the public sphere is however not doing justice to the issue. The claim that groups and individuals are excluded from the public sphere is stating that there is only one public sphere (Dawson, 1994: 199). Instead of maintaining that there is one public sphere, from which groups can be excluded, Fraser (1992) argues that there are multiple public spheres existing next to each other. She presents the idea of subaltern counter publics (1992). She indicates that there ‘are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (p. 123). In stratified societies, Fraser argues, ‘arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public’ (p. 122).

A model of the public sphere that recognizes a multiplicity of publics provides an answer to the problems of ‘singularity, uniformity, rationality, neutralization, and traditional norms and practices of communication’ that have prevailed in early Habermasian and other all-encompassing notions of public sphere and deliberation (Goodnight & Hingstman, 1997: 353). But what does this notion of multiplicity of publics, or the existence of ‘counter publics’ entail? And can this notion help to envisage a more inclusive public debate in polarized societies?

Let me first address the first question: What does the notion of counter publics entail? Counter publics can be identified through their relationship to other publics, to which they are counter (Squires, 2002). The most important characteristic of counter publics according to Asen (2000) is the recognition of publics as being excluded from the wider public sphere. The ‘counter’ lies in participants’ recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and in the articulation of alternative discourses (p. 427). The counter status of these publics addresses elements of power, struggle and resistance that take place in and between the multiple public spheres.

Thus, the term counter public refers to a public that recognizes exclusions, and an attempt to overcome these exclusions by forming alternative publics through discursive practices. It shows how alternative public discourse is articulated in response to the exclusion of specific interests in the wider public sphere. What is important is that this articulation is not through withdrawing from the wider public sphere, but rather by challenging the discourse in this sphere. Participants of such counter publics ‘still engage in potentially emancipatory affirmative practice with the hope that power may be reconfigured’ (Asen, 2000). It is in this second feature of counter publics that the relevance of this thesis lies. How can different discourses interact? If we acknowledge the existence of multiple publics that are parallel to each other, how can they engage with one another? I will first address the dual character of counter publics before turning to the interaction between different discourses. On the one hand, counter publics form spaces for ‘withdrawal and regroupment,’ and on the other they ‘function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics’ (Fraser, 1992: 124). Hence, we need to distinguish between the *intrapublic*—the inward focussed address—and the *in-
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In ‘directing their arguments outward to society as a whole,’ they engage in a public act and show a belief ‘in the transformative power of discourse’ (Asen, 2000: 429). As such, counter publics should not be viewed as enclaves (as separatist publics), which assumes a publicist orientation. ‘After all, to interact discursively as a member of public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one’s discourse to ever widening arenas’ (Fraser, 1992: 124). In this way counter public spheres can be a vital impulse for democracy; they ‘may provide vital sources of information and experience that are contrary to, or at least in addition to, the dominant public sphere’ (Fenton & Downey, 2003: 22).

Although counter publics themselves may seek interaction with or influence in the wider public sphere, the extent to which they succeed in this depends greatly on the members of the dominant public. Members of counter publics who enter the domain of the dominant public sphere may not be considered as equals (Squires, 2002: 461). Dominant publics censor, attack and otherwise hinder counter public discourses from being represented in the mainstream public sphere. Thus, even though the counter public’s subaltern nature need not preclude interaction, in a more comprehensive arena problems may arise. The question is whether participants in this comprehensive sphere ‘share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and therefore protocols of persuasion to lend their talk the quality of deliberations aimed at reaching agreement through giving reasons’ (Fraser, 1992: 126).

Here we come back to the question whether the notion of counter public can help to envisage a more inclusive public debate in polarized societies. The answer is that it does not readily provide such an account. Even though counter publics, or multiple public spheres, provide a space for alternative discourses, they do not provide a space in which different discourses come together. However, for public discussion to be truly inclusive, democratic theory asks for such a space, as otherwise the counter public’s ideas and opinions remain in isolation. It is not enough to have discourses exist next to but separate from each other. It should be possible to theorise a platform on which these different discourses and publics come together, as well as a way in which they can come together in a democratic way. It is here that counter public theory is lacking; it is too focused on the formation of insular spheres and it neglects to theorise how the discourses from these insular publics can come together in a comprehensive sphere, or the wider public sphere. Viewing the publics as islands separated from each other hinders theorising the interaction between them.

In contrast, if we view these different discourses (the general or hegemonic and the alternative or counter) as part of one overarching public sphere, instead of these being grouped in separate spheres (one hegemonic and some counter), it is possible to imagine interactions between them. Such a view, I argue, is also more in line with how discourses are positioned in practice; people will be divided on a spectrum of positions in the public sphere, rather than separated completely from other perspectives. At the core of this public sphere we find the dominant, hegemonic discourse. At the periphery we find counter discourses, where people will be more or less loosely clustered together (in this way they may resemble counter publics). In between the core and the periphery a range of discourses are positioned. So rather than islands completely cut off from each other, discourses are
found scattered throughout the public sphere. Some events can cause the periphery and the core to be pulled further apart, and thus the discourses that were positioned in between the core and the periphery will shift, increasing polarization. However, these discourses in between the two can also enable the discourses at the periphery and the core to come together. In this way, they may form the pillars of a bridge between the different perspectives. Especially when public discourse is polarized, it may be difficult for discourses from the periphery to have a (meaningful) voice in the core because of the distance between the positions. For meaningful interaction to occur between these separate positions, the mediation of these in-between voices may not be sufficient. What is needed first and foremost is openness towards these alternative discourses.

1.4.2 Interaction between different discourses: Engagement through openness

Even though the traditional account of deliberation has been problematic, democratic theorists focusing on difference do not dismiss the idea of deliberation. On the contrary, deliberation is seen as the best method to deal with fundamental differences in polarized societies. Deliberation in which difference is valued tends to ‘broaden perspectives, promote toleration and understanding between groups, and generally encourage a public-spirited attitude’ (Chambers, 2003: 318). However, ‘a political debate between citizens with deep value conflicts is only possible if there is willingness to bridge some of the deep differences in basic values’ (Fennema & Maussen, 2000: 398). Reviewing the literature on alternative accounts of deliberation reveals that the main concern is openness: openness of the debate to different participants, types of discourses and positions. However, the main aim is not to have an affluence of separate positions, but rather to have participants interact with each other. This interaction should furthermore not be a simple clash of difference,² but should rather be an engagement between different discourses. Thus deliberation concerns openness or access of all participants to the debate, positions, and discourses, and towards the other’s positions and discourses. An explanation is necessary as to what these two forms of openness entail for public discussions.

At the very least, democracy and democratic communication refer to a situation in which the process of decision-making—and, therefore, the debate—is equally open to all. It refers both to entering the debate (inclusion) and to the position within the debate (equality): Each participant should be free to raise, question and challenge issues and positions and in so doing be free from coercion. This is where the role and importance of debate lies in democracy: ‘The democratic spirit or imaginary is fundamentally one of questioning. For the community’s rule to be their own, nothing can be taken for granted or closed off from critique and revision’ (Keenan, 2003: 10).

Openness, although similar to the criterion of inclusion and equality in rational deliberative democracy theories, is different in the sense that it does not merely seek the inclusion of all people, but also of different types of discourses and forms of communication (besides or beyond what the majority would argue to be rational). It is also different with regard to what is meant by equality. Here, equality means that everyone has the right

²Such as is sought by some proponents of radical democracy (e.g. Mouffe, 2000).
to raise issues, open up debates, provide information, and question others. This does not involve the bracketing of one’s identity or interests, but rather sees the discourse to be informed by these identities and interests.

The requirement of openness goes beyond a hollow form of tolerance. Reasons that people provide in a debate need to be taken seriously and not be immediately excluded (Bohman, 2003b). The public nature of democratic communication suggests the inclusion of other citizens’ salient reasons. There has to be inclusion of those with whom one disagrees, and a recognition that others are just as entitled to participate in defining society (Bohman, 2003a). However, public debates are not always equally inclusive of participants; they can be excluded from the debate completely, be denied access to it, or they can have unequal positions within the debate, as others do not grant them equal status and capacity to effectively influence the debate (Young (2000) refers to these two types of exclusion as external and internal, respectively).

These different types of exclusion refer to different types of power that some may hold in the debate. First, power over communication refers to the capacity to include or exclude participants from the discussion. The second type is power in communication, signifying the capacity to influence or determine how people speak (Pellizzoni, 2001). The nature and the degree of employment of this power vary. Exclusion (whether internal or external) may be intentional or unintentional; the use of power may be overt or covert; it may be direct but also indirect. Power may even involve the self-exclusion of participants, whether through withdrawing from the debate completely or altering one’s contributions to it because of anticipated reactions or internalized dominant views.3 Openness to others and their positions requires a certain level of reflection on one’s own position and its relativity (Asen, 1999: 123). To be open entails acknowledging the position of others. If we treat others and their positions as equal, we will by definition assess our own position and values carefully, and be open to, listen to and respect other perspectives. In order to take openness seriously, participants are thus forced to critically examine their cultural values, assumptions and interests, as well as the larger social context. However, in divided societies it may be particularly difficult for participants to understand the other’s position.4 For this understanding to come about, it is necessary to explore types of communication other than the ‘rational’.

Not only other positions and arguments need to be considered; it is also necessary to think about different ways of presenting them. Deliberative democratic theory can incorporate contestation, rhetoric and impassioned pleas, and is not limited to the rational exchange of arguments, which may favour a certain group over others (Streich, 2002: 130). It is important that the kinds of reasons that are allowed in the debate are not specified in advance, but rather depend on the process of deliberation which decides what is acceptable and what is not (Miller, 2000: 151-152). There may even be ‘justifiable places for offensiveness, noncooperation, and the threat of retaliation’ (Mansbridge, 1999: 222).

3For a discussion on this type of power inducing and sustaining internal constraints upon self-determination see Lukes (2005).

4Hamelink (2004) discusses the relation between human rights and dialogue, and the difficulty people may have in granting these rights to people outside their community.
This would help achieve authenticity, reveal pain, anger, and hate and could ultimately further understanding, as part of openness and engagement.

Young identifies the following types of communication that have a supplementary role to rational communication: greeting (public acknowledgement), rhetoric, and narratives (2000: 52-83). These three forms of expression can help participants to communicate with one another, particularly when faced with (seemingly) insurmountable differences. Greeting, by which discussants acknowledge each other as being included in the discussion, has the function of asserting discursive equality and (re)establishing trust between the discussants (p. 60). This can especially be of help in discussions in which people differ in ‘opinion, interest, or social location’ (p. 61). Rhetoric (affective, embodied, and stylistic aspects of communication) can equally be accommodating in communication geared towards problem solving or conflict resolution, as it aims to help translate across differences. Particular to the creation of understanding is the use of narratives. Some forms of exclusion in the public sphere occur ‘because participants in a political public do not have sufficiently shared understandings to fashion a set of arguments with shared premises, or appeals to shared experiences and values’ (p. 71). In such a situation, too often assumptions, experiences and values of some participants dominate the discourse. Too often those of others are misunderstood or even ‘devalued or reconstructed to fit the dominant paradigms’ (ibid). In these cases narratives can serve to foster understanding for those that have very different experiences. These different types of expression can thus be complementary to rational expression, and may even be necessary in discussions that feature difference.\footnote{Other deliberative democracy theorists have likewise argued for inclusion of alternative communication to the rational. Bohman (1996: 59-66), for instance, argues for inclusion of different types of ‘dialogical mechanisms’ in deliberation, apart from the rational one.}

Deliberation may, through fostering understanding and appreciation of the other’s convictions, concerns, and needs, allow different groups to transcend the awkwardness, fear, and hostility that might exist, and let people ‘appreciate the plausibility of seeing the world from a different perspective’ (Valadez, 2001: 34). Ultimately, if communication takes place in the open and inclusive way set out above, ‘this dialogue enables people to navigate and interact across cultural and racial boundaries’ (Streich, 2002: 138).

What runs through all these accounts is engagement as outcome of the deliberation. Dryzek (2000) defines deliberation as the democratic communication that enables engagement across the boundaries of different discourses. In essence, engagement and challenge across discourses means ‘that individuals can be brought to reflect upon the content of discourses in which they move’ (Dryzek, 2000: 163). Engagement between discourses results in a deeper understanding of another’s position. The transformation that deliberation envisages occurs in three steps according to Young (1996: 128):

1) Confrontation with different perspectives, interests, and cultural meanings teaches me the partiality of my own, reveals to me my own experience as perspectival. 2) Knowledge that I am in a situation of collective problem solving with others who have different cultures and values from my own, and that they have the right to
challenge my claims and arguments, forces me to transform my expressions of self-interest and desire into appeals to justice. (...) 3) Expressing, questioning, and challenging differently situated knowledge, finally, adds to the social knowledge of all the participants. (...) This greater social objectivity increases their wisdom for arriving at just solutions to collective problems.

Thus, what is at stake for a society with deliberation that includes difference is not so much the legitimacy of political decisions through public opinion formation, but rather openness to, engagement in and understanding between positions. This, in the end, should lead to more democratic societies and legitimate political decisions that also consider alternative concerns.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I identified the concern of difference in public debate within plural societies. First, I examined the role of public debate in general terms by discussing theories of deliberative democracy. I identified the problems with this account of deliberation regarding the inclusion of difference. Subsequently, I turned to an alternative conception of public sphere: that of counter publics. The main concern of this chapter was with the interaction between different and conflicting discourses: the mainstream and those counter to it. The principle requirement of public debate for enabling different discourses to come together is openness. Such openness should allow for the inclusion of different discourses, participants and viewpoints, for engagement between different discourses, and for mutual understanding in highly polarized societies.

To summarize, let me distinguish the key concepts used in this thesis. Public discussion (or public debate) on an issue is seen as pivotal to democracy in polarized society. It is the 'public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged' (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002: 9). This public discussion takes place within the public sphere, which is viewed in this thesis as a virtual space constituted by all public communication on political issues. This public communication involves actors who express positions and arguments. Within this public sphere different discourses exist, including ways of speaking that give meaning to experiences from particular perspectives (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 66-67). Difference in discourse reflects differences in perspectives, experience and ways of speaking. Discourses may thus be close together or far apart, depending on how contested an issue is. A distinction can be made between the mainstream, or dominant discourses and those counter to this dominant discourse, also called alternative discourses. The latter can be more or less clustered and resembles so-called counter publics, but do not necessarily have to be defined as such.

Deliberation is viewed as the political method to democratically deal with these differences between discourses. Deliberation involves a discussion that: (i) is equally open to

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6Discourse is also viewed on the level of language. This will be addressed in the Methods Chapter, section 3.5.
all participants and viewpoints; (ii) in which participants are open towards each other’s positions, involving recognition and consideration of these; (iii) includes the occurrence of engagement between different discourses; (iv) and results in an understanding for the other and his/her position.

The central, empirical question in this thesis is whether the openness in debate is feasible in societies at large; whether people are open to difference and oppositional positions; whether people are reflexive enough to listen to stories, pleas and arguments that are presented in ways that may be different to their own. To answer this question, I will examine the openness of the online debate on immigration; specifically, I will look at the openness of its participants and the way in which engagement can come about online. The Internet is often hypothesized to be more inclusive than other types of platforms of the public sphere. Before turning to the empirical analysis conducted in this thesis, I will discuss the claims and findings of other studies that involve openness of online debate.