

*Representatives of Opinion:  
Emerson and Democratic Deliberation*

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Democratic deliberation may be characterized ideally as either a citizen-centered phenomenon, in which ideas and opinions originate from within the diverse body of the citizenry, or as an elite-centered phenomenon, directed by intellectual, political and media personalities. The former is thought to involve the direct participation of large numbers of individuals in civic associations, town meetings, citizen workshops, and other face to face venues, while the latter develops as a spectacle of opinion leaders before a passive viewing audience. Emerson combines elements of both of these images of democratic deliberation to produce a richer and more accurate account that shows that participation and the popular origination of political opinion takes place not in face to face circumstances, but in the larger arena of the media, which is populated by prominent representatives of public opinions. While this argument places Emerson squarely within the debates over the character of democratic politics, his thought has not always been acknowledged as democratic or even political in nature. Thus, it also addresses a controversy within Emerson scholarship concerning the politics of his thought and his personal political engagements.

This study of R. W. Emerson's political thought offers a reconstruction, at turns sympathetic and critical, of Emerson's theory of a democratic public sphere. It begins with a reconsideration of Emerson's basic political stance, arguing that although he has often been considered an individualist not much concerned with politics, there are

explicitly political themes that structure his thought from the earlier lectures, such as “The American Scholar,” to the late work *The Conduct of Life*.

It identifies two political themes, central to his theory of a politics of public opinion and culture. The first is the importance of specific attitudes on the part of both authors or orators and audiences for the generation of a “public,” both in the sense of “a people” and in the sense of a unique form of communication. The second is the role of representation and representative individuals in the public sphere.

On Emerson’s account, the first condition that makes a public sphere truly public and political, as is necessary in a democracy, is the application of the principle of interpretive charity. The principle holds that utterances of fellow citizens ought to be construed as meaningful and valuable, at the outset of discussion, and prior to any verification that they are in fact reasonable or acceptable. The principle of charity has two aspects: first, citizens presume that they are able to understand and judge reasons that are offered by other citizens, and second, they structure their own arguments so that it is reasonable to presume that they are generally intelligible to other citizens. The perfection of the application of the principle of interpretive charity aims at the attainment of discursive transparency, a condition in which others can recognize the intellectual steps that are required to come to the particular beliefs or judgments that fellow citizens are defending. This makes political discourse potentially persuasive and thus truly deliberative. Emerson’s political theory is thus tied to his broader understanding of authorship, audience, and creativity.

The second condition for a public sphere that can sustain democratic political action is the politically representative quality of individuals who speak and write with a public voice. This notion, pervasive throughout his writing, shows his understanding of the individual to be much more socially situated and politically engaged than is usually recognized. According to Emerson, the public sphere is structured by representative individuals who are analogous to those representatives found in electoral institutions. These representatives make public the beliefs and values present in their constituencies. They deliberate in the name of their constituencies, saying what the individuals in their constituencies could and would say, were they to also directly engage in such deliberations.

Representative individuals are tied to their constituencies through bonds of sympathy and likeness. This makes Emerson’s notion of representatives of opinion indebted to the republican conception of representation found in Anti-Federalist arguments against the sufficiency of an electoral connection between representative and constituency, and to Burke’s notion of virtual representation found in his argument against the necessity of such an electoral connection. While neither of these arguments carried the day in deliberations over the institutional embodiment of democracy, Emerson shows how these forms of representation are purified and perfected in the public sphere.

The moral consequences of a representative public sphere include the development of a sense of deliberative justice on the part of the citizenry, and the reduction of the possibility of domination and oppression by ideologically oriented elites. These ameliorative effects of representation are achieved through the extreme diversity and possibility of rapid rotation of representatives of opinion.

The size, diversity and essential anonymity of the people in large modern democracies requires that the great majority of significant political relations among

citizens be mediated by representatives, rather than take place in face-to-face contexts such as civic associations and political institutions. Representative individuals in the public sphere ensure that citizens are able to engage one another and participate in deliberative politics in modern democracies.

The role of the public speaker as a representative, who seeks to speak for others, and not for him- or herself alone, accounts for the provocative and persuasive character of deliberation, in which new and unpredictable reasons alter the course of arguments and political judgments. In this fashion, they serve as not only as “map-makers,” i.e., individuals who serve to make the visible the views of citizens, but also as “road-makers,” i.e., the creators of new political relationships, and new interpretations of political culture. For Emerson, then, the very idea of a democracy implies a perfectionistic view of politics, according to which deliberation in the public sphere must aim at amelioration and progress.