Chapter 1
Learning in Public Places: Civic Learning for the Twenty-First Century

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Citizenship, Social or Political?

I recently had to make a decision about the artwork for the cover of the book I wrote with the title *Learning Democracy in School and Society: Education, Lifelong Learning and the Politics of Citizenship* (Biesta 2011). This was not an easy task. What, after all, does 'learning' actually look like? How does one depict 'democracy'? And what does one do if one wishes to capture the two terms together and locate them in both school and society? After considering a wide range of different options – pictures of schools, adult education classes, study circles, art projects, protest marches and so on – I decided upon a rather simple and to a certain extent even idyllic picture of a flock of sheep walking away from the camera and one sheep turning its head towards the camera.[1] For me, however, this picture not only captures one of the central ideas of the book. It also provides a helpful image for the topic I wish to discuss in this chapter, which has to do with the complex relationships between education, democracy, citizenship and civic learning. I see the picture as a picture about citizenship. And the question it raises is whether the good citizen is the one who fits in, the one who goes with the flow and the one who is part of the whole, or whether the good citizen is the one who stands out from the crowd, the one who goes against the flow, the one who 'bucks the trend' and the one who, in a sense, is always slightly 'out of order'.

One could argue that the answer to this question has to be 'it depends' – and in a sense I would agree. It first of all depends on whether one sees citizenship primarily as a *social* identity, having to do with one's place and role in the life of society, or

[1] The picture can be found on http://istockpho.to/h6LwRy and the book on www.senpublishers.com

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whether one sees citizenship primarily as a *political* identity, having to do with the relationships amongst individuals and individuals and the state, with their rights and duties, and with their participation in collective deliberation and decision-making. The current interest from politicians and policymakers in the question of citizenship certainly has elements of both. On the one hand discussions about citizenship focus strongly on social cohesion and integration and on the quality and strength of the social fabric. But politicians and policymakers are also interested in citizenship because of ongoing concerns about political participation and democratic legitimation (see Biesta and Lawy 2006). The rise in attention to citizenship from politicians and policymakers – something that has happened in many countries around the world over the past decades – can therefore be seen as responding both to an alleged crisis in society and to an alleged crisis in democracy.

Yet it is important to see that the social and the political understanding of citizenship are not the same and that they therefore should not be conflated. A cohesive society, a society with a strong social fabric, is, after all, not necessarily or automatically also a democratic society, that is – to put it briefly – a society orientated towards the democratic values of equality and freedom. And we do not need to go too far back into the history of Europe in order to understand how important this observation is.

One way to understand the difference between the social and the political understanding of citizenship is in terms of how each looks at plurality and difference. The social understanding of citizenship tends to see plurality and difference predominantly as a problem, as something that troubles and threatens the stability of society, and therefore as something that needs to be addressed and, to a certain extent, even needs to be overcome. That is why on this end of the spectrum we encounter a discourse of society falling apart and a focus on citizenship as having to do with common values, national identity, pro-social behaviour, care for one's neighbour and so on. In the political understanding of citizenship, on the other hand, plurality and difference are seen as the very *raison d'être* of democratic processes and practices and therefore as what needs to be protected and cultivated. When we look at the picture of the sheep in these terms, we could say, therefore, that it precisely expresses the difference between a social and a political understanding of citizenship, where the social understanding is represented by the flock, going collectively and cohesively in the same direction, and where the political understanding is represented by the one standing out, highlighting that democratic citizenship has an interest in plurality and difference, rather than in sameness.

From the angle of the political understanding of citizenship, there is, however, a different reading of the picture possible, one in which the flock represents all those who are committed to democracy and where the one standing out is the antidemocrat, the one who opposes the democratic project and rejects the values underpinning it. But this raises a further important question, which is whether it is indeed the case that we can understand democracy as a particular, clearly defined and clearly definable 'order' that you either sign up to – in which case you are 'in' – or that you do not sign up to – in which case you are 'out' – or whether we should understand the very idea of democracy in different terms. I wish to argue that the situation is

indeed more complicated and that to simply assume that the 'order' of democracy can be fully defined and determined may actually go against the idea of democracy itself. Let me try to give you an indication of what I have in mind.

Democracy, Arche or An-arche?

The first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that there is nothing natural about democracy and also nothing rational. Democracy is a particular historical invention, and although over the centuries many people have come to see it as a desirable way to deal with the question of governance and decision-making under condition of plurality, there are no compelling reasons for democracy, at least not until one commits oneself to the underlying values of equality and freedom. The idea of government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' (Abraham Lincoln) is, after all, only an interesting option if one cares about the people and if one cares about *all* people and their freedom in an equal manner. In this respect I agree with Chantal Mouffe who, against certain tendencies in liberal political philosophy to 'naturalise' democracy, has argued that democracy is a thoroughly *political* project. This means that a choice for democracy it is neither rational nor irrational – it simply is a choice (or as I put it in my book, it is a choice following from the desire for the particular mode of political existence called 'democracy' – see also Biesta 2010). While we may well be able to give reasons for the desirability of democracy – and here we might favour Winston Churchill's 'minimal' definition of democracy as the worst form of government except for all other forms tried so far – the reasons we give only carry weight for those who are committed to its underlying values. This is why those who oppose democracy should not be seen as irrational but simply as opposing democracy. Or to put it in more abstract terms, we should be mindful that the division between rationality and irrationality does not automatically coincide with the division between democracy and its 'outside'.

To say that democracy is a thoroughly political project implies that it cannot be inclusive of everything and everyone. Mouffe (2005, p. 120) makes this point by arguing that democracy is not a 'pluralism without any frontiers' in that a democratic society 'cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries'. This does not mean, however, that the borders of the democratic community can only be drawn in one way and that the democratic order within these borders is fixed. This is what Mouffe expresses with her idea of democracy as a 'conflictual consensus' which entails 'consensus about the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, [but] dissent about their interpretation' (ibid.). The line to be drawn, therefore, is 'between those who reject those values outright and those who, while accepting them, fight for conflicting interpretations' (ibid.). While those who see democracy as natural or as rational would therefore identify the democratic order with the flock and would see the one standing out as antidemocratic and irrational, Mouffe helps us to see that the flock can only represent a particular democratic hegemony but can never lay claim to being a full and final

instantiation of the values of liberty and equality. (Mouffe also emphasises that the values of liberty and equality are always in tension, something to which she has referred as the 'democratic paradox' – see Mouffe 2000.) While the one standing out can be the one who opposes the values that inform the democratic project, it can also be the one who signifies the always necessarily incomplete nature of a particular democratic 'settlement'. The one standing out thus acts as a reminder that there is always the possibility of a 'different' democracy, that is, of a different configuration of the democratic 'order'.

One thinker who has taken these ideas in a more radical direction is Jacques Rancière (see Biesta 2011, Chapter 7; see also Bingham and Biesta 2010). There are two insights from Rancière that I would like to add to my considerations. The first has to do with his suggestion that no social order (or with the particular term Rancière uses no 'police order') can ever be fully equal. While in some societies or social configurations there may be more equality – or less inequality – than in others, the very way in which the social is structured precludes the possibility of full equality or at least makes it highly unlikely. In contrast to Mouffe, however, Rancière maintains that every social order is *all-inclusive* in that in any given order everyone has a particular place, role and identity. But this does not mean – and this is crucial – that everyone is included in the ruling of the order (and in this sense we could say that Rancière is in agreement with Mouffe, albeit for different reasons). After all, women, children, slaves and immigrants had a clear place and identity in the democracy of Athens, namely, as those who were not allowed to participate in the decision-making about the polis – which means that they were 'included as excluded', as Rancière puts it. Against this background Rancière then defines 'politics' – which for Rancière is always *democratic* politics – as the interruption of an existing social order with reference to the idea of equality. Politics, as the interruption of a particular order in which everyone has a place, is therefore manifest in actions 'that reconfigure the space where parties … have been defined' (Rancière 2003, p. 30). As Rancière puts it: 'It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only a place for noise' (ibid.).

Two consequences follow from this. The first is that democracy can no longer be understood as 'a regime or a social way of life' (ibid., p. 101), but has to be understood as occurring in those moments when the 'logic' of the existing social order is confronted with the 'logic' of equality. Rancière refers to this confrontation as *dissensus*. Dissensus, however, is not to be understood as the opposition of interests or opinions but 'as the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is heterogeneous to it' (ibid., p. 266). Democracy thus ceases to be a particular order – and here Rancière clearly differs from Mouffe – but instead becomes *sporadic* (on this idea see Biesta 2009), occurring in those moments when a particular social order is interrupted 'in the name of' equality. On this account the occurrence of democracy is therefore represented neither by the flock nor by the one standing out. With Rancière we could say that both the flock and the one standing out are part of an existing social order, albeit that they are differently positioned within it. Democracy rather occurs at the moment when one of the sheep turns its head and

makes a claim for a way of acting and being that cannot be conceived within the existing order and in that way, therefore, does not yet exist as a possible identity within this order.

One of Rancière's examples is about women claiming the right to vote in a system that excludes them from voting. The point here is, and this leads to the second implication I wish to draw from Rancière's work, that this claim should not be understood as a request for inclusion into an order from which they were previously excluded. The reason for this is that women claiming the right to vote are not after an identity that already exists. They do not want to be men, but they want to be women with the right to vote – a claim made with reference to the idea of equality. They are thus claiming the very identity that is impossible in the existing social order and are thus introducing, within a determined social order, a 'given that is heterogeneous to it' – to use Rancière's phrase. The moment of democracy is therefore not merely an *interruption* of the existing order, but an interruption that results in a *reconfiguration* of this order into one in which new ways of being and acting exist and new identities come into play. This is why Rancière argues that the moment of democratic politics is not a process of identification – which is of taking up an existing identity – but rather of dis-identification or, as he puts it, *subjectification*, that is, of becoming a democratic subject. It is the moment of the 'birth' of democratic agency. But this 'birth' is always 'out of order'. It is represented neither by the flock nor by the one standing out but is, as I have suggested, the moment when one turns its head and speaks in a new and different way. This *event of democracy* – which is also the *event of subjectification* – is, as event, impossible to capture in a static picture.

Civic Learning, Socialisation or Subjectification?

I could have started this chapter where almost everyone who talks about the relationship between citizenship, learning and education seems to start, that is, by suggesting that civic learning has to do with the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed for good citizenship. Yet the reason why I did not start and could not start from there is twofold. It first of all has to do with the fact that the meaning of citizenship is contested – and perhaps it could even be argued that the meaning of citizenship is *essentially* contested, which means that the contestation over what good citizenship is, is actually part and parcel of what democracy is about. I have shown that there is not only discussion about whether citizenship should be understood as a social or as a political identity but have also made it clear that amongst those who see citizenship as fundamentally a political identity – which is the position I take as well – there are different views about what good citizenship is. More importantly, so I wish to suggest, there are also different views about whether citizenship is a positive identity – that is, an identity that can be positively identified and articulated – or whether citizenship is to be understood as a process of dis-identification, as a moment of political agency that is always necessarily 'out of order'.

The second reason why I did not and could not start with enlisting the knowledge, skills and dispositions that need to be learned in order to become a good citizen has to do with the fact that, unlike what many seem to assume, the way in which we understand the learning involved in citizenship is not neutral with regard to how we understand citizenship itself. It is not, therefore, that we can simply go to learning theory for the learning and to political theory for the citizenship and then weld the two together to create civic learning. The point here is that as long as we see citizenship as a positive, identifiable identity, we can indeed see the learning involved as a process of the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed to bring out this identity – or to put it from the other side, the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are needed to bring newcomers into the existing sociopolitical order. If, on the other hand, the moment of democracy is a moment of dis-identification with the existing sociopolitical order and if it is the case that it is in this moment that the democratic subject emerges, then the position and nature of the learning involved change. This is why I have suggested to make a distinction between a *socialisation* conception of civic learning, which is about the learning necessary to become part of an existing sociopolitical order, and a *subjectification* conception of civic learning, which is about the learning that is involved in engagement with what we might refer to as the 'experiment' of democracy (see Biesta 2011). Whereas a socialisation conception of civic learning is about learning *for future citizenship*, the subjectification conception of civic learning is about learning *from current citizenship*, from current experiences with and engagement in the ongoing experiment of democracy.

The Experiment of Democracy, from Private to Public

Before I say more about what characterises the latter kind of civic learning – and in the final step of my chapter I will argue that this is the kind of civic learning that, in our time, we need most – I need to say a few things about the experiment of democracy. It is, after all, only when we have some sense of what this experiment entails that we can begin to identify the kind of learning that matters in relation to this experiment. I use the phrase the 'experiment of democracy' in order to highlight the necessarily open character of democracy. While I agree with Mouffe that democracy cannot and should not be entirely 'anarchic' – that is, without any form – I do believe, with Mouffe and with Rancière, that the democratic process needs to remain fundamentally open towards the possibility not only of *more* democracy but also of *different* democracy, of a different distribution of parts and places and of a reconfiguration of democratic identities and subjectivities. To think of democracy as an ongoing and never-ending experiment is a way to capture this idea.

While there is a lot to say about the dynamics of democratic experimentation, one thing that I wish to emphasise in the context of this chapter is the idea that the

democratic experiment should be understood as a process of *transformation.* And perhaps the most important transformation that is at stake in the experiment of democracy is the transformation of 'private troubles' into 'public issues' – to use the phrase of C. Wright Mills (1959). By characterising democracy as a process of transformation, I distinguish myself from conceptions that see democracy purely in aggregative terms, that is, as a mathematical number game in which only the largest number counts and where minorities just need to adjust themselves to the majority. For me democracy entails as much a concern for the majority as it entails a concern for minorities which, after all, are only minorities because of the construction of a particular majority.

But the bigger point here is that the democratic experiment needs to be understood as having an orientation towards collective interests and the common good – or common goods. It needs to be understood as having an orientation towards the issues of the public – the *res publica*. What is always at stake, therefore, in the democratic experiment is the question to what extent and in what form private 'wants' – that what is desired by individuals or groups – can be supported as collective needs, that is, can be considered desirable at the level of the collective, given the plurality of individual wants and always limited resources (on the distinction between wants and needs, see Heller and Fehér 1989). This is not only a process where, as Zygmunt Bauman has put it, 'private problems are translated into the language of public issues' but also where 'public solutions are sought, negotiated and agreed for private troubles' (Bauman 2000, p. 39). To think about the democratic experiment in terms of transformation not only means that people's *issues* become transformed. As I have tried to highlight with Rancière, the engagement with the democratic experiment also transforms *people*, most importantly in that it has the potential to engender democratic subjectivity and political agency.

Because the experiment of democracy is a process of transformation, it is also, potentially, a learning process. But the learning that is at stake is not about the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to engage with the experiment in a 'proper' manner, most importantly because, being an experiment, it is never entirely clear what a proper way to engage with this experiment would look like. That is why we should conceive of civic learning in the subjectification mode as a process that is *non-linear:* it does not lead in a linear way from a state of *not* being a citizen to being a citizen, but fluctuates with people's actual experiences of citizenship and with their engagement in democratic experiments (see also Lawy and Biesta 2006; Van der Veen et al. 2007). We should also think of this learning as *recursive*: what is being learnt is not just stored somewhere but is always fed back into action. And while it is non-linear, civic learning in the subjectification mode is definitely *cumulative*: experiences from the past cannot simply be eradicated or overwritten, but continue to play a role in future experiences and actions. The latter point is particularly important because engagement with the experiment of democracy will generate both positive and negative experiences. We should not expect, therefore, that engagement with the democratic experiment will always strengthen the desire for democratic ways of acting and being – the opposite can be the case as well.

Public Places

If this gives an indication of what civic learning in the subjectification mode is about, we can now turn to the question *where* this kind of learning might take place. This brings me to the title of this chapter, as the point I wish to make is that this kind of civic learning occurs 'in' (see below) public places. This, of course, raises the further question what public places are, what they look like, where we can find them and also what the connection between place and learning is. While the notion of public place often conjures images of town squares, market places and parks, of the Greek agora or the Roman forum, the question whether such spaces can be characterised as *public* places does not so much have to do with what they look like as with what is *possible* in such locations. What makes a place public, so I wish to suggest, is precisely the extent to which it makes the transformation of private wants into collective needs possible. Public places, to put it differently, are locations where the experiment of democracy can be enacted and where something can be learned from this enactment.

This is how, for example, David Marquand in his book *Decline of the Public* (Marquand 2004) characterises what he refers to as the public domain, by emphasising that the public domain should be understood as a *dimension* of social life, not a sector of it. The public domain, in other words, is to be understood as a practice – Marquand calls it a 'set of activities' with its own norms and decision rules – not a geographical location. Marquand emphasises that the public domain is not only *different* from the private domain 'of love, friendship and personal connection' and from the market domain of 'buying and selling [and] interest and incentive' (ibid., p. 4), but is also *separate* from these domains. This is why he defines the public domain as 'a space, protected from the adjacent market and private domains, where strangers encounter each other as equal partners in the common life of the society' (ibid., p. 27). And the key function of the public domain, according to Marquand, is to define the public interest and to produce public goods (see ibid., p. 26). This implies that the values 'that sustain, and are sustained by, the public domain' are not the values of self-interest but of collective interest (ibid., p. 57). Given that collective interest may sometimes go against one's immediate self-interest, engagement with and commitment to the public domain, as Marquand puts it, implies 'a certain discipline' and 'a certain self-restraint' (ibid., p. 57). Interestingly, Marquand argues this does not come naturally but has to be 'learned and then internalized, sometimes painfully' (ibid.).

Marquand's positioning of the public domain as being different and separate from both the private domain and the market domain – or perhaps we should say as being different and separate from the 'logic' of private interactions and the 'logic' of the market – is helpful for addressing the question to what extent public place can still be 'realised' in our time. It is helpful, in other words, for identifying developments that threaten the possibility for the enactment of the democratic experiment. Structurally, there are two threats. On the one hand there is the constant risk that the public domain is taken over by the logic of the market. Many commentators have

written on this process, most notably through the critique of neo-liberalism. What characterises the shift from a public logic to a market logic is the process in which citizens are turned into consumers of public services and are being offered choice. But choice is not a democratic concept because what is lacking in choice is precisely the idea of transformation. Choice operates entirely at the level of private wants. It is about the selection from a set menu, rather than that it entails collective involvement in what should be on the menu in the first place.

The other development that threatens the public domain comes from the side of the private domain and the logic of private interactions – and this is a phenomenon about which far less has been written. Marquand identifies two aspects to this threat. The first is what he refers to as the 'revenge of the private' (ibid., p. 79) by which he has in mind the protest against the 'hard, demanding, "unnatural" austerities of public duty and public engagement' (ibid.). This can be seen as the reluctance to engage with the experiment of democracy because it is difficult and demanding. The second aspect touches on the idea of identity politics and is expressed in Marquand's observation that the assumption that 'the private self should be omni-competent and omnipresent' has made deliberative politics of any sort 'virtually impossible' (see ibid., pp. 80–82). This resonates with the point I made earlier that engagement with the experiment of democracy not only involves the possibility of the transformation of one's 'issues' – that is, of one's wants – but also of one's identity and one's self.

Many commentators have suggested that the decline of the public sphere and the wider 'crisis' in democracy – manifest in such things as low voter turnout in countries where there is no duty to vote, decreased membership of political parties and political organisations and a general decline in interest in democratic politics – is the result of a lack of interest and motivation on the side of citizens. This not only means that citizens are seen as the *cause* of the crisis in democracy – which explains why they are being blamed for it. It also explains the huge investments made in many countries around the world over the past decades in citizenship education, on the assumption that we need to create or produce better citizens in order to get better democracy.

This way of thinking fits with a socialisation conception of civic learning where the learning is supposed to produce the good citizen and where, in turn, good citizens are supposed to bring about good democracy. But there is a different reading possible of what is going on, one where the retreat from citizenship is not seen as the *cause* of the crisis in democracy but rather as its *effect*. By replacing democracy with choice, by letting the logic of the market into the public domain, and by giving up on the idea that democracy is ultimately about transformation, the possibilities for the enactment of democratic citizenship begin to disappear. While this may look like a process in which citizens are withdrawing from democracy, it is actually a process in which citizens are being 'pushed out' and in which, therefore, the very possibility of democratic citizenship is being pushed out. Rather, therefore, than to suggest that we need better citizens in order to get better democracy – which is the argument from the socialisation conception of civic learning – I wish to suggest that *we need more and better democracy in order to get better citizens* (an insight that also plays a central role in John Dewey's work; see Carr and Hartnett 1996). And

this is why the civic learning we need in our time, a time in which the experiment of democracy is under threat from a range of different directions, is the kind of civic learning that is intrinsically related to the enactment of the experiment of democracy. It is the kind of civic learning that not only happens in public places but that, in a sense, constitutes such places *as* public places.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored the relationships between citizenship, democracy and learning in order to articulate a conception of civic learning that can respond to some of the challenges contemporary democratic societies are faced with. One of these challenges has to do with the decline of the public sphere, the decline of the very sphere where the experiment of democracy can be enacted. I have argued that we should not see this decline as the *result* of a lack in good citizenship. For that reason I do not believe that investment in the production of good citizens – something which over the past decades has become a high priority on the agenda of policymakers and politicians and has had a significant impact on the curricula of schools and colleges – is the kind of civic learning we need. I have argued that rather than to blame individuals for an apparent lack of citizenship and civic spirit, we should start at the other end by asking about the actual opportunities for the enactment of the experiment of democracy that are available in our societies, on the assumption that participation in such practices can engender meaningful forms of citizenship and democratic agency.

In this respect I believe that democratic practices do indeed provide important learning opportunities (Van der Veen et al. 2007), bearing in mind that we should not understand such learning opportunities in terms of socialisation but rather in terms of subjectification. Whereas the first always runs the risk of domesticating the citizen by taking the existing sociopolitical order as its point of departure and frame of reference, the second has a more explicit focus on the more difficult and more complex ways in which, through the engagement with the experiment of democracy, political agency and democratic subjectivity can be promoted and supported. To highlight the role of learning in the experiment of democracy – something that follows from the fact that democracy is fundamentally a process of transformation – does not imply a requirement or a demand for such learning and particularly does not mean that the state could require or demand such learning from its citizens (on the politics at work in such demands see Biesta 2013). Unlike the socialisation conception of civic learning, the subjectification conception does not start from the assumption that people should acquire a set of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions before they are 'allowed' to enact their citizenship and engage in the experiment of democracy. There is, in other words, no such thing as a diploma or driving license for democracy. This is not to suggest, as I have argued, that democracy is entirely open, that it is without frontiers. Engagement in the experiment of democracy always needs to occur with reference to the democratic values of equality and

freedom. Engagement in this experiment is therefore not so much based upon a particular set of civic skills and competencies as that it is driven by a desire for the particular mode of political existence called democracy. This desire can neither be taught nor learned but can only be fuelled by engagement with the democratic experiment (Biesta 2010).

The most important conclusion to be drawn, therefore, from the ideas presented in this chapter for anyone concerned about the quality of our democratic processes and practices, is that the focus should not be on telling citizens that they need to learn more in order to become better citizens, but that the priority should lie with keeping open those places and spaces where the experiment of democracy can be conducted. This does not mean that we need to have more town squares and market places – albeit that that question of architecture is definitely not insignificant. But what it needs first and foremost is that we remain vigilant that the logic of democracy is not taken over by the logic of the market or the logic of the private domain.

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