

Democracy & Democratic Education

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ABSTRACT: A profound problem posed by education for any pluralistic society with democratic aspirations is how to reconcile individual freedom and civic virtue. Children cannot be educated to maximize both individual freedom and civic virtue. Yet reasonable people value and intermittently demand both. We value freedom of speech and press, for example, but want (other) people to refrain from false and socially harmful expression. The various tensions between individual freedom and civic virtue pose a challenge that is simultaneously philosophical and political. How can we resolve the tensions philosophically in light of reasonable political disagreements over the relative value of individual freedom and civic virtue? Instead of giving priority to one value or the other, this essay defends a democratic ideal of *conscious social reproduction*, which consists of three principles: *nonrepression*, *nondiscrimination*, and *democratic deliberation*.

KEY WORDS: civic virtue, deliberation, democracy, discrimination, freedom, repression

In 17th century, when John Locke wrote *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, education was closely identified with governance. The identification is no longer apparent in ordinary language, nor in contemporary political or educational philosophy. We need to revive the identification in order to understand the relationship between education and democracy (or any other political system). Education entails governance – whether of the young by the old, the ignorant by the knowledgeable, the foolish by the wise, or the relatively powerless by the powerful. And politics is the means by which educational authority establishes and asserts itself in all but the simplest human societies.

The most defensible conception of democratic education is democratic in both its end and its means. The end of democratic education is to create democratic citizens, people who are willing and able to govern their own lives and share in governing their society. And the means of educational governance are a complex balancing of parental, professional, and public authority, a combination consistent with the political ideals of representative democracy, which support the basic liberties of all adult members of a society.

We must also understand democratic education by the ends and means it opposes. In its commitment to critical deliberation, democratic education rejects inculcating blind allegiance to any political system and to any conception of the good life. In its commitment to pluralistic authority, democratic education opposes claims to exclusive (or ultimate) educational authority by parents, professionals, philosopher-kings, or self-appointed vanguards who shield themselves from public accountability.

The most profound problem that education poses for any pluralistic society with democratic aspirations is how to reconcile individual freedom and civic

virtue. Children cannot be educated to maximize both individual freedom and civic virtue. Yet reasonable people value and intermittently demand both. We value freedom of speech and press, but want (other) people to refrain from false and socially harmful expression. We value freedom of religion and association, yet we want governments to shape our social environment so people are likely to believe in good (or at least socially benign) religions and philosophies of life rather than repugnant ones. We value the freedom to choose our marital partners and re-choose them, yet we also prize stable families (for, among other reasons, their greater contribution to social welfare). We value living and working where we like, and we also value friendly and familiar places to live and work. We are proud to support the extension of our freedoms to other people, but we also fear that opening up our borders and our markets will erode our own way of life and standard of living.

These tensions between individual freedom and civic virtue pose a challenge for education in every pluralistic society. The challenge is simultaneously philosophical and political. How can we resolve these tensions philosophically in light of the political disagreement that exists among reasonable people on the relative value of individual freedom and civic virtue? Some people seem willing to settle for freedom for themselves and civic virtue for other citizens and children, but this solution obviously won't work. Far from obvious, however, is how any society can justly resolve its internal disagreements.

Should priority be given to one value over the other? If so, which one? Philosophers of what I call the "family state" give priority to teaching those civic virtues that bind citizens together in mutual pursuit of a comprehensive common good.¹ These communitarian philosophers appear untroubled by the fact that societies united by a comprehensive common good have been without exception repressive and discriminatory. The common good of the New England Puritans of seventeenth-century Salem commanded them to hunt witches; the common good of the Moral Majority in the United States today commands them not to tolerate homosexuals. Philosophers of the family state want us to live in Salem, but not believe in witches. Yet the protection of individual freedom is all that stands between intolerant movements like the Moral Majority in the United States and the contemporary equivalent of witch hunting.

In reaction to the repressive implications of the family state and in defense of the priority of individual freedom, many philosophers of what one might call the "state of individuals" argue that education must remain neutral among conceptions of the good life. "We have no right," Bruce Ackerman says, "to look upon future citizens as if we were master gardeners who can tell the difference between a pernicious weed and a beautiful flower. A system of liberal education provides children with a sense of the very different lives that could be theirs."² But this radically individualistic conception of education is politically troubling in its own way. It fails to justify imposing a politics of "liberal neutrality"³ among conceptions of the good life on citizens who (reasonably) value civic virtue as well as individual freedom.

Communitarian philosophers of the family state assert their commitment to

civic virtue and liberal philosophers of the state of individuals assert their commitment to individual freedom at the expense of denying the legitimacy of the other value. The practical consequence of their thinking is that basic individual freedoms are sacrificed to communal virtue or individual freedom is expanded so far as to forego the virtues essential to creating and maintaining a good society.

This resistance to recognizing the legitimacy of education for *both* individual freedom and civic virtue stems from formulating our educational options as a dichotomy. Either we must educate children so that they are free to choose among the widest range of lives because freedom of choice is the paramount good, or we must educate children so that they will choose *the* life that is best because a rightly-ordered soul is the paramount good. Let children define their own identity or let society define it for them. Give children liberty or give them virtue. This is a morally false choice. Cultivating character and intellect through education constrains children's future choices, but it does not uniquely determine them. There need be nothing illegitimate about such constraints (consistent with moral autonomy), although some constraints (epitomized by political and religious indoctrination) surely are illegitimate.

We stand at a philosophical and political impasse unless we can defend an alternative to communitarian solidarity – which insists that children be educated to accept the singularly correct and comprehensive conception of the good life – and liberal neutrality – which insists that education not predispose children toward *any* conception of the good life. Both philosophies of education denigrate citizenship, although in radically different ways, by taking serious moral disagreements off the political (and educational) agenda. At the same time, they disserve the genuine values – of individual freedom and civic virtue – that they claim to champion.

The ideal of democratic education denies the validity of this dichotomy between individual freedom and civic virtue, which dominates the current debate between philosophers of the state of individuals and the family state. Individual freedom of choice is most valuable in a society that also cultivates many of the civic virtues typically defended by communitarians, among them, veracity, self-discipline, diligence, compassion, and loyalty. These civic virtues are bound to bias (and often legitimately *intended* to bias) citizens towards some ways of life and away from others. And the civic virtues essential to a democracy include the “strength of mind, individuality, [and] independence” that liberals, following the 18th-century philosopher of education Noah Webster, typically call upon education to cultivate in future citizens.⁴

We can make some progress in this controversy between communitarians and liberals (or, more accurately, individualists) if we develop a more democratic ideal of education. Education should prepare citizens for consciously *re-producing* (not replicating) their society. We should therefore support a set of educational practices to which citizens, acting collectively, have consciously agreed, provided that those practices also prepare future citizens for participating intelligently in the political processes that shape their society. The ideal of

democratic education – *conscious social reproduction* – both supports democratic decisionmaking and constrains what democracies are permitted to do in education. Democracies must act so as to secure the conditions for future democratic deliberations.

For a society to reproduce itself *consciously*, it must be *nonrepressive*. It must not restrict rational consideration of different ways of life. Instead it must cultivate the kind of character and the kind of intellect that enables people to choose rationally (one might say “autonomously”) among different ways of life. The democratic principle of nonrepression prevents the state, and any group within it, from using education unnecessarily to restrict rational deliberation of differing conceptions of good lives and societies. It also requires the state to cultivate the capacity for rational deliberation. Nonrepression is therefore not a principle of purely negative freedom. It secures freedom from interference only to the extent that it forbids using education to restrict rational deliberation or consideration of different ways of life. Nonrepression is compatible with (indeed it requires) the use of education to teach those civic virtues – such as veracity, nonviolence, toleration and mutual respect – that serve as foundations for rational deliberation of differing ways of life. These civic virtues are to be taught both by example and by argument. If citizens are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty, they must learn not just to *behave* in accordance with democratic values but also to *understand* them (and therefore to *think* critically about them).

Nonrepression is not neutral among conceptions of the good life, nor is its strongest defense based on an ideal of political neutrality. The ideal of democratic education itself generates the principled defense of nonrepression, and the principle of nonrepression then sets practical limits on popular authority. Because *conscious* social reproduction is the ideal of democratic education, majorities as well as minorities must be prevented from using education to stifle rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good.

For a *society* rather than some segment of it to reproduce itself, it must be *nondiscriminatory*. *Everyone* must be educated nonrepressively. Nondiscrimination extends the logic of nonrepression, since states and families can be selectively repressive by excluding entire groups of children from schooling or by denying them an education conducive to rational deliberation. Repression commonly takes the more passive form of discrimination in education against ethnic and racial minorities, girls, and other disfavored groups in society. The effect of educational discrimination is often to repress, at least temporarily, the capacity and sometimes even the desire of disfavored groups to participate in politics or to assert their own preferences in private life. Discrimination in education is therefore a cause as well as an effect of political disadvantage, as highlighted by the history of educational discrimination against African-Americans in the United States.

In its most general application to education, the principle of nondiscrimination prevents the state, and all groups within it, from denying anyone an educational good on grounds irrelevant to the legitimate social purpose of that

good. Applied to the education necessary to prepare children for future citizenship, the nondiscrimination principle becomes a principle of nonexclusion. No educable child – regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sex, parental interest (or disinterest) – may be excluded from an education adequate to participate in democratic politics.

A pluralistic democratic society can neither resolve nor avoid the problem of discrimination in education by “privatizing” schools. Proponents of privatization in the United States have suggested that governments offer parents “educational vouchers” worth up to a specified sum when spent on schooling of their choice for their children. Some European countries distribute public monies to established religious groups to run their own schools on their own terms. Unconstrained (i.e., truly privatized) voucher plans risk increasing racial, religious, and ethnic segregation, and decreasing educational opportunity for disadvantaged children whose parents are unlikely to find them a good school. The alternative of delegating education to religious and ethnic groups has been a recipe for perpetuating rather than ameliorating existing religious and ethnic hostilities. But the most fundamental problem with privatization plans concerns not their consequences (although they are bad enough) but their implicit denial of governmental responsibility for nondiscrimination and nonrepression in education. Regardless of whether schools are operated by public or private authorities, democratic governments retain ultimate (although by no means exclusive) responsibility for nondiscrimination and nonrepression in education just as they retain responsibility for public safety even if they decide to “privatize” their police forces. Although the operation of schools and police forces can be privatized, responsibility for fulfillment of their public purposes cannot be.⁵ Given the all-too-human temptation of public officials to pass both bucks together, privatization remains an unpromising path to democratic education.

For a society to be *reproductive*, it must institute practices of democratic *deliberation and decisionmaking* for its adult citizens, and for children to the extent necessary for cultivating their capacities of democratic deliberation. To shape their society, citizens and their representatives engage in collective deliberations and decisionmaking at different levels of government. They need not replicate their current practices, and they must not do so in the many instances where those practices are repressive or discriminatory. (The aims of democratic education will not be fully realized, for example, until American citizens can share in self-determination not only in government but also in their daily work. Or until Soviet citizens are free to campaign and vote in multi-party elections.) Reproduction never requires replication. Nonrepression and nondiscrimination often do not permit it.

Democratic reproduction also places special demands on education, to cultivate deliberative capacities and social responsibility in students. Education entails authority, but *democratic* educational authorities must prepare children for self-governance while they are being governed. Democratic schools are so-called not because they treat students as the intellectual or political equals of

their teachers, but because they teach students self-governance. John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which distributed decisionmaking authority and responsibility even to the youngest students, aimed at being a "miniature community, an embryonic democratic society,"⁶ not by putting the most important curricular and hiring decisions up to majority vote but by allowing students to practice their political skills and to assume significant responsibilities in the school, skills and responsibilities that were appropriate to their level of intellectual and social development.

Studies amply demonstrate that conventional civics and history courses in American schools have little impact on students' political knowledge, political interest, sense of political efficacy, political trust, or civic tolerance.⁷ Both the means and the ends of these conventional courses are misconceived. History and civics courses should teach lessons in democratic deliberation, lessons similar to the one that Diane Ravitch observed being taught in a public high school in Brooklyn, New York. The students were asked to discuss whether it was right for the United States to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima:

The lesson was taught in a Socratic manner. Bruckner did not lecture. He asked questions and kept up a rapid-fire dialogue among the students. "Why?" "How do you know?" "What does this mean?" ... By the time the class was finished, the students had covered a great deal of material about American foreign and domestic politics during World War II; they had argued heatedly; most of them had tried out different points of view, seeing the problem from different angles.⁸

The most relevant result of such courses from the perspective of democratic education is not an increase in political knowledge, cultural literacy (in the narrow sense), or even political trust or efficacy, but an increase in the willingness and ability of students to *reason and argue about politics, collectively and critically, respectful of their reasonable differences*, a willingness and ability that is distinctively democratic.

If this understanding of democratic education is correct, then the ideal of democratic education lies at the core of a commitment to democracy. The ideal of democracy is often said to be collective self-determination. But there is no "collective self" to be determined. There are just so many individual selves that must find a fair way of sharing the goods (and bads) of a society together. It would be dangerous, as liberal critics of communitarianism charge, to assume that any state – even a democratic one – *constitutes* the collective self of a society, and that its policies in turn define the best interests of its citizens.

But we do not need this dangerous metaphysical assumption to defend a democratic ideal, an ideal of citizens sharing in deliberatively determining the future shape of their society. The democratic society that citizens determine is not a self that defines their best interests. There remain independent standards for defining the best interests of individuals and reasons for thinking that individuals, rather than collectivities, are generally the best judges of their own interests. To avoid the misleading metaphysical connotations of the concept of collective self-determination, we may better identify the democratic ideal as conscious social reproduction, the same ideal that guides democratic education.

The convergence of democratic ideals is of course not a coincidence. Democratic education supplies the foundations upon which a democratic society can cede civil and political freedoms to its adult citizens without placing their welfare or its very survival at great risk. In the absence of democratic education, risks – even great risks – will still be worth taking for the sake of respecting the rights of citizens to be free from the political repression that all but inevitably accompanies an authoritarian state. But our passion for democracy should not blind us to the risks involved in democratizing countries whose educational and political systems have perpetuated religious intolerance, ethnic hatred, and blind obedience to authority. Democratic government depends on democratic education for its full moral and political strength.

The dependency is reciprocal. Without democratic government, the best education to which a society could aspire might be similar to that practised for thirteen centuries in Imperial China, where a centralized state supported schools and designed a thorough system of examinations that determined access on highly meritocratic grounds to all state offices. When working at its best, the Chinese educational system stimulated considerable social mobility⁹, but the nondemocratic state usurped control of what rightly belongs to citizens: political decisions concerning (among other important things) how future citizens are educated outside the home. When it usurps democratic authority, the state also eliminates the strongest, political rationale for democratic education: teaching the virtues of democratic deliberation for the sake of future citizenship. Democratic education therefore follows at the same time as it reinforces a more general political commitment to democracy.

Democratic citizens learn how to govern by first being fairly governed as children. After they have been governed, they must have a right to govern themselves (without repression or discrimination). This is a democratic understanding of politics and education: being governed and governing in turn, where governing includes the nurturing of children by parents, their formal instruction by professionals, the structuring of public education by public officials accountable to citizens, and the shaping of economy and culture by both private and public authorities.

Recent defenses of democracy, most notably by the philosophers Richard Rorty and Michael Walzer, have taken the form of a priority principle: democracy has priority over philosophy.¹⁰ What citizens decide is right takes precedence over what philosophers demonstrate to be right. The case for democratic education and democracy more generally does not entail giving priority to democracy over philosophy. The priority principle misleads us about both philosophy and democracy, and unnecessarily weakens the case for democracy. If the wisest philosophers, like Socrates, are distinguished not just by knowing what they do not know but also by publicly admitting the limits of their knowledge, then far from subordinating itself to democracy, philosophy is the source of democracy's strongest moral defense. Philosophy defends democracy when it discovers that the best life and the best society to which we can aspire must be among those that we can recognize and claim as our own.

Philosophers cannot simply give citizens a good society, anymore than parents can give their children a good life. One reason for this inherent limit on the power of philosophers (and parents) is that a good life must be one that people live from the inside, by accepting and identifying it as their own. Another reason is that any credible standard for a good life will leave room for discretionary choices on the part of the people who are living those lives. Philosophers, like parents who would tell people precisely how to live their lives, are morally pretentious. Democratic education embraces this insight of liberal neutrality, but it rejects the view that individual freedom is therefore the only legitimate end of education and democracy.

Returning to the question with which we began: should a society try to teach freedom or virtue? The ideal of democratic education commits a society to teaching virtue, what might best be called *democratic* virtue, the character that is necessary for a flourishing constitutional democracy. The virtues of democratic character include veracity, self-discipline, nonviolence, toleration, mutual respect for reasonable differences of opinion, the ability to deliberate, to think critically about one's life and one's society, and therefore to participate in conscious social reproduction. Democratic education thereby cultivates both personal and political autonomy, the capacity of all educable citizens to deliberate, both individually and collectively, among a wide range of personal and political lives. Within the constraints of nonrepression and nondiscrimination, a democratic society leaves citizens free to shape their personal and political lives in a plurality of images that they can legitimately identify with their informed, moral choices.

The pedagogical demands of democratic education are therefore great. Schools, for example, must cultivate both moral character (the virtues of veracity, nonviolence, tolerance, etc.) and the capacity for moral reasoning (logic, critical understanding, etc.) in future citizens. Nothing less will do. People adept at logical reasoning who lack moral character are sophists of the worst sort: they rationalize their self-interest, by cleverly using moral arguments to serve whatever ends they happen to chose for themselves. They do not take morality seriously nor are they able to distinguish between the obvious moral demands and the agonizing dilemmas of life. But neither can we find democratic citizens among people who possess sturdy moral character without a developed capacity for reasoning. Such people are ruled only by habit and authority, and are incapable of constituting a society of sovereign citizens. Education in character and in moral reasoning are therefore both necessary, neither sufficient, for creating democratic citizens. Under the best of circumstances, democratic education is demanding. In societies beset by some combination of disintegrating or authoritarian families, nihilism or ideological fundamentalism, drug or alcohol epidemics, authoritarian workplaces, unemployment, and manipulated or commercialized mass media, democratic educators and policymakers face a much more formidable task.

The distinctive features of democratic theory are its simultaneous refusal to dissolve the tensions between individual freedom and civic virtue in a potent

philosophical solution (of communitarian solidarity or liberal neutrality) and its insistence on finding a principled way of living with the tensions, in keeping with the democratic ideal of conscious social reproduction. Living with tensions is never easy, nor is it without its sacrifices. But for any pluralistic society, whose citizens value both individual freedom and civic virtue, communitarian solidarity and liberal neutrality – the alternatives to democracy that promise an escape from moral tensions – are far worse.

NOTES

¹ My discussions of the family state and most other matters in this essay are more fully developed in *Democratic Education*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.

² Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, New York: Yale University Press, 1980, p. 139.

³ Because neutrality has become such a philosophically popular defense of liberalism these days, it bears mentioning that the neutrality defense is conspicuously absent from the classical liberal tradition. Neither John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, nor any other major classical liberal philosopher invokes neutrality as a defense of religious liberty or any other individual right. The critique of liberal neutrality, far from being a critique of classical liberalism, spares liberalism from a damaging misinterpretation. My defense of democratic education is consistent with certain contemporary contractarian understandings of liberalism. Insofar as democratic education requires a defense of nonrepression and nondiscrimination, it is a *liberal* democratic conception.

⁴ Noah Webster, 'On the Education of Youth in America' [1790], in Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965.

⁵ The best review and balanced critique of the recent privatization movement in the United States is John D. Donahue, *The Privatization Decision: Public Ends, Private Means*, New York: Basic Books, 1989.

⁶ John Dewey, 'The School and Society', in *The Child and the Curriculum* and *The School and Society* [1900, 1915], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 18.

⁷ See, for example, M. Kent Jennings, Kenneth P. Langton, and Richard G. Niemi, 'Effects of High School Civics Curriculum,' in M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence: The Influence of Families and Schools*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974, pp. 191–92. Jennings, Lee H. Ehman, and Niemi also find that only a small minority of high-school history and civics teachers take as one of their major goals to challenge their students to think critically about history or politics. 'Social Studies Teachers and Their Pupils,' in *The Political Character of Adolescence*, p. 226.

⁸ Diane Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times*, New York: Basic Books, 1985, p. 228.

⁹ See Ping-Ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, esp. pp. 257–62.

¹⁰ See Richard Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy', in Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan (eds), *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; and Michael Walzer, 'Philosophy and Democracy,' *Political Theory* 9 (August 1981), pp. 384–94.