The Conflict Between Education and Democracy

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This article argues that there is an inherent and inescapable conflict between the democratic governance of a jurisdiction and an education system that is not ideologically and politically driven. In other words, in a democratic society, education has to be an ideological and political tool, unless the basic relationship between democracy and education is redefined and reconstituted.[1] To be sure, the problem I present here is not that education is a contested notion; education that is absolute and cannot be challenged is not an education at all, but indoctrination. I also do not refute that democracy itself is a contested notion; indeed, the meaning of democracy is essentially contested, as part of the meaning of democracy is struggles over how it should work.[2] The problem lies, rather, in a mismatch between democracy and education, a mismatch that eventually leads to unreasonable expectations from, and the unrealized promises of, education. For, education governed through *general* democratic mechanisms (as opposed to education in a democracy governed through *particular* democratic mechanisms) cannot possibly meet the lofty goals assigned to it.

In the first section of this article I review and criticize what I consider to be historical—rather than philosophical—arguments about the subordinate status of education in a democracy. In the second section I explain the inherent conflict between democracy and education. Finally, in the third section I examine two possible strategies to address this conflict.

HISTORICAL AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL ARGUMENTS

Several thinkers who critically examine the role of education in society take a holistic view of education. However, while pointing to the instrumental role of education in society and the political exploitation of education, their critique is not directed towards democracy itself as a democracy (or the demo-

cratic political system and mechanisms themselves). Rather, the critique is either broader—against 'agents' such as the state, society, or ideology—or, when the critique is directed towards democracy, is mostly historical and circumstantial. To demonstrate this, I will briefly bring forward the positions of Michael Walzer, John Wilson, and Pádraig Hogan.[3]

Walzer rejects universal meanings of justice that cut across all spheres, and develops a framework that intends to prevent domination and monopoly over social goods: "Domination is ruled out only if social goods are distributed for distinct and 'internal' reasons."[4] He offers a model of social spheres with their "relative autonomy," and advocates multiple spheres of justice, and by implication, multiple sub-communities, with each sphere being relevant to the meanings of particular social goods. Walzer includes education as one of the distinct spheres within which societies produce and exchange valued social goods. When education is considered such a sphere, school walls "keep society and economy out" and it has genuine potential to deliver egalitarian results: "Schools can provide a genuinely common education only if they are protected from corporate and governmental intrusion. Conversely, if they are protected, schools are likely to have egalitarian effects even in a capitalist society."[5] Walzer acknowledges the danger of democracy: "The greater danger of democratic government is that it will be weak to cope with re-emerging monopolies in society at large, with the social strength of plutocrats, bureaucrats, technocrats, meritocrats, and so on … Hence democracy is, as Marx recognized, essentially a reflective system, mirroring the prevailing and emerging distribution of social goods."[6] But when Walzer refers directly to democracy or democratic qualities in the context of education, democracy is considered positively. For example, as an object of learning or an educational experience. Thus, when discussing the school, he asserts "the need of every child to grow up within this democratic community," and claims that "[t]he democratic school, then, should be an enclosure within a neighborhood."[7]

In a similar vein, Wilson is very suspicious of society as a foundation for education. He warns against "'basing education on 'society' in the sense of basing it on a particular view of 'society': so long as we continue to educate

rather than train or indoctrinate, we have no licence to put forward democracy, or dictatorship, or egalitarianism, or authoritarianism, or anything else *as a basis*."[8] Wilson also directly doubts democracy: "In such political education as goes on in our own society, the merits of democracy are simply taken for granted—and never mind what Plato thought."[9] Wilson puts democracy side-by-side with other historical "pressurising agents": "It makes no difference whether the pressure comes from a dictatorial government, from market forces, from the local community, from the prevailing climate of 'democratic opinion', or from anywhere else … such agents take their cue from society rather than from the nature of the enterprise."[10]

Hogan's critique is perhaps the most historical out of the three. For him, "[e]ducational practice has ever been attended by powerful forces—whether institutionalized cultural and historical ones or more personal or spontaneous ones—that would close off the interplay or divert it to ends other than educational ones."[11] Power over education reached through democratic processes is not significantly different than the old ecclesiastical control:

> The ministries of education in Western democracies have, more often than not, embraced one or other variant of a traditional custodial view and tailored it to their own purposes. That is to say, in either blithe or calculated disregard of urbane democratic educational thought—like that of Dewey for instance—they have presumed to view public education chiefly as part of the machinery of political power.[12]

Thus, despite the fact that reforms of education "invariably sprang from democratically elected governments, they were scarcely less demanding of compliance than were the ecclesiastical controls on learning in the Middle Ages," and "they revealed a deep allegiance on the part of those authorities to doctrines that were inhospitable to criticism or questioning."[13]

While Walzer, Wilson, and Hogan might seem at times to convey philosophical arguments against democracy's treatment of education, they mostly (rightly, from an educational point of view) complain about history: society and

economy were not kept out of the education sphere (if there is or ever was one), state's activity was not limited with regard to the education system, schools were and are penetrated by other spheres, economic and democratic political forces pressured education, and ministries of education in democratic governments disregarded and violated educational thought (and continue to do so). In short, there are accusations—based on historical evidence—of exploiting, or misusing, the democratic infrastructure, mechanisms, processes, and powers in order to use the education system for ideological and political gains. But while it is likely to be true that in most cases democratic governments are not as welcoming to educational values and goals as many educators—including philosophers of education—would like, it remains circumstantial evidence against democracy's attitude towards education; indeed, important historical evidence that should be closely examined by historians, political scientists and sociologists. However, in order to assert an *inherent* conflict between democracy and education, a philosophical argument is required.

DEMOCRACY AGAINST EDUCATION

Many scholars reflect on the relationships between education and democracy in terms of enabling and supporting: Each of them is an enabler and supporter of the other.[14] John Dewey probably developed the paradigmatic argument in this regard. In *Democracy and Education*, for example, he asserts that "the realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration, makes a democratic community more interested than other communities in deliberate and systematic education. The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact."[15] Beyond the "superficial explanation" that "those who elect and who obey their governors" should be educated, the "deeper explanation" is that "[a] society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability."[16] Educated people, in turn, understand and advocate a preference for democracy over other social arrangements.

However, when political demands and constraints about the meaning and goals of the education system are considered, democracy is revealed as an obstacle for realizing educational potentials. Despite deliberative and participatory models and meanings of democracy, democracy always invites and encourages a competition between ideologies and worldviews.[17] The prize in this competition is power. In any comprehensive ideology, education plays an important and even crucial part; there is no lasting ideology without education, whether institutionalized education or not. In democratic nation states (or jurisdictions), institutionalized mass education—schooling—is a major vehicle for transferring and instilling ideology.[18] And since in a democracy—like other regimes—the power gained in a jurisdiction legitimizes significant authority and control over all public domains, as long as institutionalized education is a public good, democracy by definition means control of one particular dominant ideology (or some combination or compromise between similar dominant ideologies) over institutionalized education. According to this logic, it is not accidental that institutionalized education has always been subordinate to those in power, including in democracies. As Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons argue, the school, an institution aimed at serving as "a source of knowledge and experience made available as a 'common good'," was always under close inspection and monitoring, and moreover was given legitimacy as long as it served those who had the power to shut it down:

> It has been the school's good fortune throughout history to have escaped definitive censure by judge or jury or to have been robbed of its right to exist. … It was tolerated so long as it subjected itself to programmes of adjustment or applied itself in the service of a set of fixed (religious and political) ideals and ready-made projects (nation-building, civilizing missions).[19]

To claim that there is an inherent conflict between democracy and education means that the servitude status of the education system in democracies is not necessarily (and usually is not) a result of corrupt, bad, or amoral politicians, or even politicians with some evil agenda and extreme ideology

who are eager to exploit schools in order to disseminate their ideas and instill their values in the minds of youth. Historically, democratic governments constituted policies that are at times more and at other times less friendly to what critical educators approve of or to interests of different actors in the education system.[20] Democracies, of course, are man-made. Thus, Gert Biesta is right in claiming that "there is nothing natural about democracy and also nothing rational," and that democracy "is a particular historical invention." But while such characterization is true and should make us cautious in our expectations form democracies, a more fundamental explanation of why a democratic governance of education—in the sense of 'of the people, by the people, for the people'—is problematic for education, lies in the fact that democracy, or democratic polity, allows the education system to be perceived as a legitimate means to nurture and transmit political and ideological programs.[21]

Thus, a conflict between democracy and education worth its name stems from channeling the public's political and ideological interests through democratic mechanisms into the education system, effectively subordinating the education system to political and ideological interests that are different and even in conflict with several central educational goals, at least as these educational goals are presented in the literature (such as epistemic goals that relate to rationality, autonomy, and truth, and moral and political goals).[22]

I do not argue, of course, in favor of a totalitarian regime. I also do not argue against democracy itself, as few scholars do, nor do I point to specific problems with the democratic process (which are significant and by themselves challenge the democratic nature of societies, voting turnout being one of them).[23] I do argue, however, that there is an inherent conflict between a democratic polity and an education system, as long as democracy is understood (at least) as rule by the people and the education system is understood as an arena that introduces the young to a critical view of reality and enables and encourages alternative ways of life.[24]

It is important to stress that the conflict between democracy and education cannot be solved by theoretical attempts to bring together different and contradictory educational goals, some of which are more educational

and others more instrumental. This is because the mere subordinate status of education does not provide educators (both professionals and scholars) with sufficient power to effectively integrate in policies or in practice significant educational considerations that are not politically or ideologically driven. This is despite maneuvers to somehow reconcile educational goals that do not align with each other, by offering relationships between them such that all are met in a satisfactory (although not optimal) manner. For example, Biesta sees the aims of subjectification, qualification, and socialization as more or less three equal and overlapping dimensions or domains in which "educational processes and practices always operate."[25] But these and other educational programs are doomed to failure because when it comes to education (probably not only in education, but especially in education) there cannot be a genuine compromise: in a democracy, those in power are in power exactly in order to use their power to advance their agenda, and in a democracy, education is a legitimate tool for realizing that agenda. In Biesta's case, qualification and socialization will always distort or eclipse—if not defeat—subjectification. Therefore, I argue, the focus in addressing the democracy-education conflict should shift from goals of education to governance of education (who has the power to decide), beyond current deliberative and participatory models.

ADDRESSING THE CONFLICT

In this section, I offer two strategies to address the democracy-education conflict. One strategy is designated for educational practice (although founded on theoretical arguments), and the other considers governance of the education system as a social sphere as a whole.

What can be done from "within" education in order to address the inherent conflict with democracy? One encouraging strategy is a trend in recent years towards more political than social citizenship education. That is, citizenship education that enables and encourages students and teachers to challenge the existing socio-political order. What is especially promising in this trend is an openness to question democracy itself, as well as calls to re-evaluate our (and

students') understanding of democracy. Scholars in this area draw on theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Cornelius Castoriadis. For example, following Mouffe's "agonistic pluralism" and Rancière's "sporadic" alternative conceptions of democracy, Claudia Ruitenberg calls for an "inductive political education" that "begin[s] not with political theories or the abstract request to 'imagine a desirable society' but with discussions of concrete perceptions of injustice."[26] As opposed to education for democratic citizenship that focuses on "fostering communicative capacities" and is based on "deliberative conceptions of democracy," Ruitenberg sees "disagreement as a constitutive aspect of democracy" and argues that "the democratic disagreement is a passionate affair."[27] Therefore, "political education ought to provide opportunities to foster affective attachments to political identities."[28] Ruitenberg calls for "a radical democratic citizenship education" that "would be an education of political adversaries."[29]

For Biesta, democracy "has to be understood as occurring in those moments when the 'logic' of the existing social order is confronted with the 'logic' of equality," and therefore democracy "ceases to be a particular order … but instead becomes *sporadic* … occurring in those moments when a particular social order is interrupted 'in the name of' equality."[30] Thus, the moment of democracy is "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."[31] Following this meaning of democracy, Biesta makes a distinction between a socialisation conception of civic learning, "which is about the learning necessary to become part of an existing socio-political order" and "learning *for future citizenship*" on the one hand, 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" and "about learning *from current citizenship*, from current experiences with and engagement in the ongoing experiment of democracy," on the other.[32] Biesta calls for the latter mode, which is a process that is non-linear, recursive, and cumulative.[33] He clearly expresses his hope for a different democracy by saying: "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.*"[34]

Finally, Ingerid Straume criticizes a "static conception of democracy" where "the political system is taken as a given, and education conceptualized as an instrument for stability and social integration."[35] She calls for citizenship education that advocates a society that "questions itself with respect to its being-society" and "where the collective asks itself: Are these the laws that we ought to have? Are they fair and just? If not, what would be a fair and just law?"[36]

All these calls for political citizenship education are inspiring and important as they subject democracy itself to scrutiny. However, while they promote the political dimension of democracy, they still do not question the problematic democratic control over the *education* system. This necessitates explicitly including schooling as one of the domains for political acts. This means self-reflection in schools, by students and teachers, about education, understanding that the conflict between democracy and education is a source of injustice, and creating a moment of interruption about the education system to bring about reconfiguration of the relationship between democracy and education, to use some of the notions mentioned above. This task, of course, is not a simple (but not impossible) one to be carried out in schools themselves, whether as part of citizenship education or in general. Perhaps the particular mission about education's status is better to be launched outside of schools, among educational theorists.

This brings me to the second strategy. The inherent democracy-education conflict suggests that as long as the education system is another social service that is governed by the broad public—indeed indirectly through its representatives—there is no way to rescue it from the wishes of the public (or particular groups in the public with political leverage). Dewey had his own doubts about the public governance of education. He asks: "Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?"[37] Following Dewey's stipulation that this question depends on both internal and external considerations, and that internally, "[i]t is not enough to see to it that education is not actively used as an instrument to make easier the exploitation

of one class by another," it is clear that the democratic state is a problematic authority to control institutionalized education.[38] Dewey never explicitly proclaimed against the authority of the state over education, but he did make the courageous statement:

> Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives. To go outside the educational function and to borrow objectives from an external source is to surrender the educational cause. Until educators get the independence and courage to insist that educational aims are to be formed as well as executed within the educative process, they will not come to consciousness of their own function. Others will then have no great respect for educators because educators do not respect their own social place and work.[39]

By using the terms "educational function," "educators," and "educative process," Dewey suggests that he does not limit "education" to an academic discipline but that he refers to a broader social sphere of practice (which, admittedly, includes academic inquiry). This broad meaning for education's autonomy is supported by several scholars, such as Wilson's aforementioned argument against basing education on a social or political ideology, Hogan's claim that "education is precisely a *sui generis* undertaking, or more plainly, a coherent practice in its own right," and Masschelein and Simons' claim that "the school must suspend or decouple certain ties with students' family and social environment on the one hand and with society on the other."[40] Calls for education's autonomy in these senses—although they do not explicitly address the democracy-education conflict—are important for thinking about how to keep education a public good but also for liberating the education system from a subordinating and exploitive democratic governance. Conceptualizing education's autonomy will hopefully help to reply to Wilson's questions: "Are there educational values in their own right, perhaps enshrined in the concept of education itself? Or are educational values just a mishmash of moral and political and other values, as these happen to crop up in the practice of education?"[41] If a theoretical work could find those educational values, and if these

values could gain wide public legitimacy, it would be a significant step towards addressing the democracy-education conflict.

It is important to note that while education's autonomy seeks a clear and more sustainable separation between party politics (and the general democratic mechanisms) and education, this does not mean avoidance of political issues in schools. On the contrary; autonomous education will be probably more inviting to political citizenship education (and political issues) than the current ideologically driven and instrumental education. In terms of Castoriadis, education's autonomy will filter or block (as much as possible) "The political" (Fr. *le politique*)—general institutional political arrangements—but will encourage "Politics" (Fr. *La politique*)—the broader sense of political activity of explicitly putting the established institution of society into question, or "politics proper."[42] But whatever conceptualization of education's autonomy might arise from future theoretical work, the education system cannot and will not be able to reach autonomy as long as in its core it is tied to general democratic political mechanisms and processes.

While the suggestions for political citizenship education have some potential to be realized in the short or medium term—but with limited impact on the democracy-education conflict—the notion of education's autonomy requires much more theoretical work and a long-term broad social and political struggle. However, if this struggle is successful (even partially), the status of education will change significantly, and with it the democratic governance of the education system.

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1 Unless mentioned otherwise, I use the term "education" in the sense of institutionalized mass education, or schooling. These terms are used interchangeably.
2 See Gert Biesta, "Learning in Public Places: Civic Learning for the Twenty-First Century," in *Civic Learning, Democratic Citizenship and the Public Sphere*, eds. G. Biesta, M. de Bie & D. Wildemeersch (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2014), 1-11.
3 In order to demonstrate the historical and circumstantial dimensions, I am letting the scholars' voice be heard with minimal interpretation.
4 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Dux, 1983), xiv.

5 Ibid., 206, 204.

6 Ibid., 15-16.

7 Ibid., 217, 225.

8 John Wilson, "Education Versus Society," *Oxford Review of Education* 23, no. 3 (1997), 336.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 340.

11 Pádraig Hogan, "Education as a Discipline of Thought and Action: A Memorial to John Wilson," *Oxford Review of Education* 32, no. 2 (2006), 262.

12 Pádraig Hogan "Teaching and Learning as a Way of Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003), 217.

13 Pádraig Hogan, "Preface to an Ethics of Education as a Practice in Its Own Right," *Ethics and Education* 5, no. 2 (2010), 88.

14 This is usually expressed in terms such as "democratic education," "education for democracy," or "education in democracy." See, for example, John Peter Portelli & Patrick Solomon, *The Erosion of Democracy in Education: Critique to Possibilities* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 2001).

15 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New Delhi: AAKAR Books, 2004/1916), 93.

16 Ibid., 94.

17 Martin Samuelsson and Steinar Bøyum, "Education for Deliberative Democracy: Mapping the Field," *Utbildning och Demokrati* 24, no. 1 (2015): 75–94; Yannis Papadopoulos and Philippe Warin, "Are Innovative, Participatory and Deliberative Procedures in Policy Making Democratic and Effective?," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 4 (2007): 445-472.

18 Here "ideology" is taken in a broader sense than just religion, and encompasses also economic and cultural worldviews. Thus, capitalism is an ideology that penetrates schools. See: Trevor Norris, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

19 Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School. A Public Issue* (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture & Society Publishers, 2013), 9; Ibid.

20 For example, teachers unions. See Terry M. Moe and Susanne Wiborg, eds., *The Comparative Politics of Education* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); As Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren demonstrate for the American context during the second half of the 20th century. See Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, "Introduction: Schooling, Cultural Politics, and the Struggle for Democracy," in *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle* (Location: Publisher, 1989), xi-xxxv.

21 Biesta, "Learning in Public Places," 3.

22 Of course, parents' interests in education are often designed or fed by interests of dominant social forces such as the economy. This does not change the basic conflict; see Harvey Siegel, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapters 1-3; John Portelli, & Francine Menashy, "Individual and Community Aims of Education," *The SAGE Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010): 415-433.

23 For example, as Brennan argues for "the rule of the knowledgeable" (epistocra-

cy). Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

24 This is, of course, only one central feature of democracy.

25 Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), ix. See also, Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010); Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, 2006).

26 Claudia Ruitenberg "Conflict, Affect and the Political: On Disagreement as Democratic Capacity," *In Factis Pax: Journal of Peace Education and Social Justice* 4, no. 1 (2010), 52.

27 Ibid., 40, 41, 42.

28 Ibid., 41.

29 Claudia Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28, no. 3 (2009), 270.

30 Biesta, "Learning in Public Places," 4.

31 Ibid., 5.

32 Ibid., 6.

33 Ibid., 7.

34 Ibid., 9 (emphasis in original).

35 Ingerid S. Straume, "Democracy, Education and the Need for Politics," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 35, no. 1 (2016), 29.

36 Ibid., 43.

37 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 105.

38 Ibid; the aforementioned historical arguments, as well as neoliberal assaults on education and capitalist attempts to invade schools, are only part of the evidence for the instrumentalization of education that is initiated, supported, or encouraged by the democratic state. See, for example, Marta Baltodano, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of Public Education: The Corporatization of Schools of Education," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 4 (2012): 487-507.

39 John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science of Education* (New York: Liveright, 1929), 38.

40 Hogan, "Preface to an Ethics of Education," 90; Masschelein and Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 15. A special issue of *Educational Theory* on education's autonomy is also currently underway.

41 John Wilson, "Perspectives on the Philosophy of Education," *Oxford Review of Education* 29, no. 2 (2003), 284.

42 Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, David Ames Curtis, ed. and trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 143–174. In Mouffe's terms, who used the two terms differently, education's autonomy will allow more access to the antagonist dimension of "the political", and less to the procedural aspect of "politics". See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).