Education for democracy

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Abstract:
This article takes it cue from John Dewey and his views on the interrelationship between democracy and education. The basic premise is that education and democracy are inextricably linked and that in a free society the link is severed only at our peril. Education must be both public and democratic if we wish to preserve our democracy's public spaces. We should resist calls for 'excellence' if this means educating only 'the best' and excluding those most likely to fail. On the other hand, we should likewise resist the tendency to jettison excellence (or just plain competence) in the name of educational equality.

The basic premise of this article is that education and democracy are inextricably linked and that in a free society the link is severed only at our peril. Education must be both public and democratic if we wish to preserve our democracy's public spaces. We should resist calls for 'excellence' if this means educating only 'the best' and excluding those most likely to fail. On the other hand, we should likewise resist the tendency to jettison excellence (or just plain competence) in the name of educational equality.

The issue is not whether we prefer excellence or democracy. It is whether the excellence we naturally wish for can be democratic, whether our democracy, which is about life in common, must mean a common life of mediocrity. To its critics, democracy has traditionally meant mob rule: the rule of the rabble, of base prejudice and ignorant opinion. In this view, popular sovereignty becomes the sovereignty of mediocrity and the celebrated commonwealth becomes a euphemism for the lowest common denominator. The faith in democracy must refuse the antinomy. It cannot and does not argue for the virtue of mob rule; rather, it insists that democracy means raising the common denominator, transforming the individual through education into a deliberative citizen. The point of democracy is not to empower the ignorant and the unreasonable, but to educate them so that, when empowered, they can govern reasonably and live well.[1]

Important thinkers and exponents of the democratic tradition,[2] while warning against the dangerous tendency of democracy to degenerate into new forms of despotism and conformism, have insisted that a democracy can flourish only insofar as its citizens are able to appropriate and cultivate those virtues that formerly pertained exclusively to the aristocratic classes. These include virtues such as self-reliance and an independent

1 This is the basic thrust of Benjamin Barber's book *An Aristocracy for Everyone* (1994).

2 Various thinkers could be mentioned, for instance John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Arnold, Alexander Hamilton, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

spirit, disdain for what is trendy or fashionable, a healthy scepticism towards 'experts' and pretentious world reformers, etc. The aim of democracy, as one can for instance gather from the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson,[3] is *not* to make an end to the idea of a society 'ruled by the best', but rather to replace one form of aristocracy with another: an 'artificial aristocracy' based upon contingent factors such as ancestry and wealth must make room for an aristocracy which does not, at least in principle, exclude anybody simply on account of accidental social and historical conditions. In pursuing its ideal of equality, democracy must always guard against the danger of overemphasising the levelling of differences between its citizens, at the cost of the ideal to uplift them. In this context Nietzsche made the following salient remark:

> *Two kinds of equality*. – The thirst for equality can express itself either as a desire to draw everyone down to oneself (through diminishing them, spying on them, tripping them up) or to raise oneself and everyone else up (through recognizing their virtues, helping them, rejoicing in their success) (Nietzsche 1996:300).

We should take seriously an old-fashioned hypothesis, such as that advanced by John Stuart Mill, that 'the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves' (Mill 1926:193).

We should admit no dichotomy between democracy and excellence, for the true democratic premise encompasses excellence: the acquired virtues and skills necessary to living freely, living democratically and living well. It assumes that every human being, given half the chance, is capable of the self-government that is his or her natural right, and thus capable of acquiring the judgment, foresight and knowledge that self-government demands.

The fundamental assumption of democratic life is not that we are all automatically capable of living both freely and responsibly, but that we are all potentially susceptible to education for freedom and responsibility.[4] Democracy is less the enabler of education than education is the enabler of democracy. We need to reexamine the relationship between schools and political institutions, between the classroom and civil society, between education and democracy. There was a time in well-functioning democracies when this relationship was taken for granted, when schools, colleges and universities expressed a common commitment to education as a concomitant of democracy. Historically, the meaning of *public* education was precisely education into what it meant to belong to a public: education in the *res publica* – in commonality, in community, in the common constitution that made plurality and difference possible. Thus, someone like John Dewey still firmly believed in the civic role of schools, colleges and universities in fostering citizenship and preparing the young for life in a democratic culture. According to him 'the measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit … in the first place, the school must itself be a community life' (Dewey 1916:415-416). In our day and age, however, the link between schooling and community and between education and democracy seems to have been lost.

3 Arendt refers frequently (and with great admiration) to this correspondence, especially in *On Revolution* (1965).

4 See Barber 1994 and Gutmann 1999.

Learning begins at birth, and much of it takes place at home or in the marketplace, in the streets or in front of the television or the computer screen. Yet what happens here is largely a private matter. While society can cajole and hint and guide and suggest, the greater part of what transpires in the minds and hearts of the young is beyond it. This makes formal schooling, however inadequate, our sole *public* resource: the only place where we, as a collective, self-conscious public pursuing common goods, try to shape our children to live in a democratic world. Can we afford to privatize the only public institutions we possess? Must we choose between excellence and equality?

I do not think so. In the tradition of Jefferson and Dewey, I believe it is possible to understand all public education as liberal education – teaching liberty – and thus to understand liberal education as democratic education. Vocational or pre-professional training, what were once called the 'servile arts' (*artes serviles*), may be private. But public education is general, common, and thus in the original sense 'liberal'. This means that public education is education for citizenship. In elitist regimes, in technocratic societies, it may appear as a luxury and a waste of money. Here education means private apprenticeship in the professions, the credentialing of elites, and perhaps the scholarly training of a few for lives of solitary intellect. But in democracies, education is the indispensable concomitant of citizenship. Where men and women would acquire the skills of freedom, it is a necessity. The autonomy and the dignity, no less than the rights and freedoms of all individuals depend on the survival of democracy: not just democratic government, but a democratic civil society and a democratic civic culture. There is only one road to democracy: education. And in a democracy, there is only one essential task for the educator: teaching liberty (Barber1994).

Liberty, however, must not be conceived in its purely negative sense, merely as the absence of all constraint, as *laissez-faire*. We often tend to equate freedom with solitude, with privacy, with rights – especially the right to acquire property and to pursue our private fortunes without limit and without interference by the state. We think of freedom as freedom *from* somebody or something. In the political domain, we pay less attention to what we are free for than to what we have emancipated ourselves from. Yet in the setting of human development and civil society, freedom is closely connected with community, with common possibility, and with self-realization in contexts that are inevitably social. Although we may use the imagery of laissez-faire as the key to our liberty, most people simply do not conceive of liberty in practice as being tied up with solitude, anarchy and endless choice. People feel free concretely not simply where they have choices, but where their choices feel meaningful; not where there is chaos in which anything is possible, but when what is possible is a set of life choices ordered by ethical or religious values they have chosen for themselves; not where they are left alone, but when they participate in the free communities that permit them to define common lives autonomously and establish common identities freely. Psychologically and politically, freedom is relational and depends on a nexus of social linkages. My actions are chosen by me in response to a communal world of values and life plans that I share with others, and in whose determination I may ideally participate.

In its most accessible and sensible form, liberty is a bridge between individuals and their communities rather than a wall separating them. This is perhaps what Rousseau and Kant meant when they described freedom as obedience to a law we prescribe to ourselves, thus reminding us of the intimacy of rights and responsibilities, of freedom and limits, of liberation and self-government. To obey laws we give to ourselves is in fact a very persuasive definition of democracy. It sets freedom in its civic context: we

are free *through* laws we make for ourselves rather than free *from* laws. The latter is mere anarchy.

Tocqueville understood this civic dimension of freedom well. Far from securing individuals against one another, he noted, freedom actually 'can deliver them to get in touch with one another, promote an active sense of fellowship' (Tocqueville 1955:xiv). More recent writers have echoed Tocqueville. To Hannah Arendt, the public nature of liberty suggested that only the citizen could be free. 'Freedom generally speaking,' she wrote, 'means the right 'to be a participator in government,' or it means nothing at all' (Arendt 1965:221). Freedom means more than being left alone. Democracy is the rule of citizens, and citizens alone are free. For citizens are self-conscious, critical participants in communities of common speech, common value and common work that bridge both space and time. As freedom yields community, so the forms of community and commonality alone yield freedom. Education makes citizens; only citizens can forge freedom. Democracy allows people to govern themselves; indeed, it insists that they do so. Education teaches them the liberty that makes self-government possible.

Education is about learning to be free, and means ultimately setting students free from their teachers too. But there is a great deal of difference between setting them free and leaving them alone; between cultivating their autonomy and annihilating all limits; between helping them to make free choices and pushing them into free-fall. Students need protection from their own not yet mature selves, achieved by exposing them to the reality of limits, the necessity of discipline, the benefits of deferred gratification; by asking them, by requiring them, even by demanding of them, things they would not necessarily require from themselves, precisely because they are not yet the educated men and women the process seeks to produce.[5]

If the young were born literate, there would be no need to teach them literature; if they were born citizens, there would be no need to teach them civic responsibility. But, of course, educators know that the young are born neither wise nor literate nor responsible – nor are they born free. They are born at best with the potential for freedom, literacy and responsibility. The educator must know how to exploit, challenge, coerce, or seduce these potentials into flowering. Education is about change, and change often hurts. That is why discipline, rules and requirements always play a role in cultivating autonomy and freedom. That is why the teacher must sometimes, precisely in the sense that Rousseau suggested in his most famous paradox, force students to be free; which is to say he must guarantee their eventual freedom as responsible adults and citizens by imposing on their freedom as students. He must respect their aspiration to freedom sufficiently to curtail its abuses wherever they stand in the way of its own growth (Barber1994).

Education is about learning, and learning is about knowledge. But what is knowledge? I take knowledge or truth to be an evolving communal construction whose legitimacy rests directly on the quality and character of the social process that engenders it. On this model, education is everywhere and always an ineluctably communal enterprise, and one that should conform to communicative processes that are genuinely democratic and that occur in free societies. The conditions of truth and the conditions of democracy are one and the same: As there is freedom, as the community is open and inclusive and the exchange of ideas thorough and spirited, so there is both more democracy and more learning, more freedom and more knowledge. Knowledge is al-

5 See Barber 1994.

ways provisional – ideas conditionally agreed upon. And just as no argument will be accorded merit because of its source alone, so no individual will be privileged over others simply because of who he is or where he comes from. Neither education nor research can prosper in an unfree society, and schooling is the only way we are likely to be able to produce citizens who uphold freedom. If, as Jefferson argued in his *Notes on Virginia*, the people are 'the ultimate guardians of their own liberty,' then we had best 'render them safe' via a thorough education. 'The only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty' he wrote to James Madison in 1787, is to 'educate and inform the whole mass of people.' One could go even further than Jefferson's instrumental formula making education 'the guarantor of liberty.' The reverse is also just as true: liberty is the guarantor of education. We not only have to educate every person to make him free, but we have to free every person to make him educable. Educated men and women make good citizens of free communities, but without a free and inclusive learning community you cannot educate men and women. This is precisely what Dewey means when he suggests not merely that education is crucial to democracy, but that democracy itself is

> more than a form of government, it is a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity (Dewey 1916:101).

The point where democracy and education intersect is the point we call community. If democracy is a mode of associated living, then it is also true, Dewey has written, that 'in the first place, the school itself must be a community life.' Dewey insists that the 'realization of the meaning of linguistic signs … involves a context of work and play in association with others' (*ibid*:416). He is saying that in the absence of community there is no learning; that language itself is social, the product as well as the premise of sociability and conversation.

We need to reread Dewey, recomprehend him, for underlying the pathologies of our society and our schools – beneath the corruptions associated with alcohol and drugs, complacency and indifference, violence and gangsterism – is an affliction of community: its corruption, its fragmentation, its breakdown. We can no more learn alone than we can live alone. And if little learning is taking place in our schools and colleges, it may be because there is too much solitude and too little community among learners (and their teachers too). Schools that were once workshops of intimacy have been transformed into factories as alienating as welfare institutions and as lonely as suburban malls. The best lack neither facilities nor resources, neither gifted teachers nor able students; but often they are devoid of any sense of community. And without community, even the best facilities and an excellent curriculum will not be able to inspire learning or promote freedom. Learning entails communication, communication is a function of community. The equation is simple enough: no community, no communication; no community, no learning, no education; no education, no citizens; no citizens, no freedom; no freedom, then no culture, no democracy, no schools, no civilization. Cultures rooted in freedom do not come in fragments and pieces. You get it all, or you get nothing (Barber 1994).

For Dewey, who was deeply influenced by Hegel and neo-Hegelians such as T H Green and Walt Whitman, democracy involves much more than a theory of political organization. It is more fundamentally a great social and moral ideal that comprehends all human relations. The democratic ideal embraces for Dewey both a philosophy of ongoing social reconstruction and a philosophy of 'a personal way of life.' It was his conviction that democracy as a mode of social, political and economic life could be sustained and perfected only if democracy also became a personal philosophy and faith, a unifying way of ethical life and spiritual growth.[6] As a comprehensive moral ideal, democracy should govern human relations in family life, the school, the church, business and industry as well as in government.

Dewey considers freedom a basic democratic value because it is necessary to the realization of personality and the pursuit of happiness. The self, he argues, is essentially a self-determining will, and if personality is to be perfected 'the choice to develop it must proceed from the individual.' Hence, the development of the self is thwarted in authoritarian social structures where power and control are centralized in the hands of the few. Dewey points out that self-realization requires the development of moral will, moral responsibility, the capacity for moral choice. The self becomes and is the self it chooses to be in its concrete activities. In Dewey's view persons are genuinely free only insofar as they have developed a capacity for intelligent judgment and choice. People are not born with this capacity. It must be developed, and the achievement of positive freedom is conditioned by the quality of social institutions in which an individual lives, learns and works.

Democracy as a social ideal also means a community of free persons in which all are bound together by shared experience and a commitment to the common good. 'Since democracies forbid, by their very nature, highly centralized governments working by coercion,' Dewey points out, 'they depend upon shared interests and experiences for their unity…' (Dewey 1978:137-138). Freedom of inquiry, assembly and speech become essential, for 'free and open communication … is the heart and strength of the American democratic way of living.' Class divisions, religious or racial prejudices, and discrimination on the basis of sex 'imperil democracy because they set up barriers to communication, or deflect and distort its operation.' The democratic spirit is antithetical, then, to all social barriers that estrange human beings from one another and limit the potential for shared experience. 'Democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion' (Dewey 1986:350). Any social group imbued with the democratic spirit seeks a free give and take with its neighbours. In this way the sharing of experience, the discovering of common values, and the building of community expand. Such is the democratic strategy for the progressive enlargement of authentic community until it embraces all of humanity. In Dewey's world community, the primary social entities would not be nation states, but those voluntary associations formed by men and women from around the world to pursue their shared interests in education, the arts, the sciences, business, sports, etc. The chief task of government is to protect and facilitate 'the life of free and enriching communion' which is the very life of democracy.

'If democracy has a moral and ideal meaning,' Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*, 'it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded to all' (Dewey 1978a:129). In other words, as he points out elsewhere, in a democratic community every person is both a

6 See Steven Rockefeller's essay on Dewey (1992).

'sustaining and sustained' member of the whole (Dewey 1986b:68). In the final analysis, Dewey believes that human beings educated in a genuinely liberating environment will act in a socially responsible fashion because it offers them a path to the deepest and richest fulfillment possible. He rejects the idea of a fundamental dualism between the individual and society, self and world, as the product of a false psychology. The individual person is not an atomic entity that can develop itself and find satisfaction as an isolated self. Humans are social beings interconnected with their environment, and the communities in which they choose to live shape their character, habits and beliefs. They have a basic need to feel that they belong to the larger whole and find enduring meaning in life by deep-seated adjustment with their world. According to Dewey's psychology and theory of education, developing one's distinctive capacities in and through responding to the needs of the community is the soundest approach to self-realization. A person best serves the common good by devotion to the capacities with which he or she is endowed and by loyalty to the needs of the social environment. 'There is something absolutely worthwhile, something 'divine' in the demands imposed by one's actual situation and powers' (Dewey 1967:321). The ideal towards which a democratic society should work, then, is creation of a community in which all individuals are provided with the opportunity to develop and employ their special abilities. The individual in this way finds realization of self, and the community is sustained.

For Dewey, social institutions exist first and foremost, not as means of producing things, but as 'means of creating individuals,' as agencies for developing responsible, self-motivated, resourceful and creative persons (Dewey 1978b:191). In other words, all social organizations have an educational task to perform:

> … the test of all the institutions of adult life is their effect in furthering continued education. Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status. And this is all one with saying that the test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility. Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society (*ibid*:186).

Dewey further explains what this entails: 'Full education comes only when there is a responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity, in shaping the aims and policies of the social group to which he belongs' (*ibid*:199). Emancipation from external oppression and social welfare programmes cannot set a people free unless their living, learning and working environment develops in them the powers of initiative, inventiveness, deliberation and intelligent choice.

Dewey's ideal of social democracy has been criticized as impractical and utopian.[7] Its realization does involve overcoming complex educational, social and economic

7 Reinhold Niebuhr, who in the 1930's was a harsh critic of Dewey's liberal optimism, conceded in 1944 that a consistent pessimism regarding human nature leads invariably to "tyrannical political strategies." Niebuhr concluded: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." See his *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*

problems. Nevertheless it remains a valid definition of a genuinely liberated society and an ideal by which democratic culture should be guided.

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(1944):xii-xv. Cornel West also raised important points of criticism against Dewey. See his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989):101-107.