Pluralism, Justice, Democracy, and Education: Conflict and Citizenship

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The pluralism that marks the United States has grown increasingly diverse. From the varied tribes that first peopled the continent to the distinct European ethnics that colonized it, the nation's origins are steeped in disparate religions and cultures. Despite nativist barriers erected by Euro-Americans with colonial roots, waves of immigrants kept coming in response to the lure of fertile lands, political freedoms, and economic opportunity. The power of capital and unmatched arms promised protection against the threats that pushed new generations of immigrants to risk the journey into the unknown; this same power snatched others into slavery and thrust them into a peculiar institution that expanded that power even further. Over time, every corner of the globe became represented within the nation's body politic. This pluralistic citizenry has often been more at home in its distinctions than it has embraced its commonality; ethnic, linguistic and religious groups have sometimes found it difficult to coexist peacefully, just as each also struggled with internal divisions.

E Pluribus Unum shaped the Revolution's rhetoric and hope, but after a half-century of existence the American experiment in democracy remained mired in deep divides of region, race, religion, language, and more. The desire among dominant elites for national coherence infused the emerging crusade for public education. A common school experience grounded in shared values and scientific knowledge promised to forge some unity as "Americans" that would transcend particular differences. Conflict and evil would then give way to enlightened resolution, and citizens would fulfill their communal duties and "govern the governors" within a broadly formed and accepted framework of understanding. This universal morality and rationality would enable citizens to build the fair institutions and social relations recognized as the foundation of democratic life. These uniquely "American" citizens could establish the just democracy imagined as the nation's destiny.

This essay explores some flaws in this vision of democracy and education. It argues that if pluralism and diversity are taken seriously, then conflict should be expected in moral and political matters no less than in the economic and social life of the nation. If disagreements are as much a part of democratic life as are agreements, then a different conception of citizenship should animate public education. In a time when patriotic fervors quell dissent, insist on singular notions of good and evil, and push the nation more deeply into war, our very survival as a democracy may depend on alternative understandings of morality and our duties as citizens. I argue that pluralism and diversity are fundamental in the moral domain and critical to a just democracy, and thus public education has a special responsibility to prepare citizens to engage the moral and political conflicts that are central to democratic life.

Moral Diversity

Monotheistic religious movements in the Western world ordered the seeming chaos of the moral universe by demanding adherence to a single conception of the right and good. The anarchy of competing moral directives associated with the multiple gods of paganism or with an amoral godless existence gave way to greater moral uniformity under supernatural auspices. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions offered codes of ethics and law that spelled out moral guidelines and expectations that were accessible to individuals even if sometimes requiring priestly or specialist interpretation. Standards for right and wrong became established as routines in daily life, and religious institutions developed and maintained doctrines to adjudicate conflicts of duties. Notwithstanding the schisms that emerged, traditional societies assured members that the path of righteousness was known and its necessary steps open to any who accepted the faith.

Enlightenment thinkers shared the assumption of the necessity for a singular moral ordering of personal and social life, even as they distanced themselves from religious traditions and replaced covenants with supernatural powers with social contracts and the imperatives of rational calculations. Bentham and Mill sought moral assurance in a sum of measured happiness, and Kant in universalizable rules. In either case, moral certitude was gained by applying logic and rationality, and in this sense both utilitarians and deontologists follow their classical forebearers Plato and Aristotle. The conviction that reason should naturally prevail over emotions and feelings in moral matters has been the dominant trend in Western philosophy, though Hume and others have reversed this pride of place. Nonetheless, both religious and philosophic traditions assume that multiple justified conclusions to moral deliberations and diverse conceptions of the right and good represent a threat to the stability and well-being of individuals and society. These traditions seem to fear that bedlam, mayhem and chaos rule in place of personal rectitude and social harmony without a singular ordering to the moral universe.

Aspirations toward a unified moral perspective defy history, not only by being blind to the actual divisions both within and among perspectives, but also by refusing to acknowledge their own historically and culturally specific origins and evolutions. "Conceptions of the good, ideals of social life, visions of individual virtue and excellence, are infinitely various and divisive, rooted in the imagination and in the memories of individuals and in the preserved histories of cities and of states."[1] That is, social life with all its varieties of custom, mores, culture, religion and practical reason conditions moral thought, which reflects the diversity endemic to different ways of life. Forms of rationality also have distinctive historical origins and emerge from the necessities of social life, even if their logics and argumentative norms are only loosely attached to their genesis. In addition, the attempt to impose rationality as a universal standard of judgment on moral experience defies the role of aesthetic, imaginative, and relational understanding in moral thought, as various feminist critiques of ethical paradigms have insisted.[2]

While convergent pressures emanate from rational moral deliberations, divergent pressures arise from the broad cultural activities of moral imagination, from poetry, storytelling, drama, music, and the visual arts. Not surprisingly, our pluralist

multicultural milieu expresses a diversity of ideals of the person and of the best social and political arrangements. In fact, as the moral imagination flourishes in cultural expressions, conflicts about the substance of morality and justice get elaborated within public discourse. This enriches debate, engenders the social changes required to extend the scope and application of justice, and enables people to more fully embody their particular conception of the good. These dynamics ebb and flow, sometimes shaping new (possibly hegemonic) moral norms. Historical processes of moral conflict, debate and change lead certain social practices"— such as bribery, nepotism, slavery, or religious intolerance — to become seen or felt as immoral or unjust by many, but not all. Thus conflicts and ambivalences remain, and no finality or conclusiveness can be expected of the equilibrium points that punctuate moral conflict.

These processes suggest that moral systems are at least partially specific to time and place. Some theorists of moral pluralism nonetheless think this particularity gives way to more general agreements in regard to certain great evils of human experience.[3] Starvation, war, tyranny, and similar sufferings are directly and deeply felt; not only do these perennial human catastrophes cross cultural and historical boundaries, but they are judged negatively without any necessary recourse to moral norms or institutions. Although some people explain away these evils as matters of fate or divine design, few fail to be morally moved, especially if they directly experience them. Yet most evils become discernible through social and cultural discursive practices that elaborate the meaning of morality. The domination of women, and poverty, are still only becoming widely regarded and felt as evils after debates spanning centuries and continuing to this day. Over time, and through the clash of competing moral conceptions, more evils have become regarded not as givens but as moral and political failures subject to melioration. In fact, such matters occupy the major portion of public debate and of the business of political and social institutions, and thus they are major preoccupations of citizen activism.

CONFLICT AND JUSTICE

Most recent theories of justice or ethics mimic scientific theories in seeking to construct systems that apply the smallest possible number of general laws to individual cases, using deductive logics to determine singularly best solutions to disputes or questions. Equality, fair deserts, and respect for inalienable rights are examples of such fundamental principles used to anchor theories of justice.[4] Other theorists have argued that justice is radically pluralistic and a contingent historical creation of particular political communities.[5] They claim there can be no ultimate arbiter among conflicting systems of justice nor among their criteria for the distribution of social goods, nor can there be a theory-independent way to eliminate variations in the list of social goods requiring just allocation. Moreover, as circumstances affect priorities, these lists change along with the values and standards that order them, even within particular conceptions of the good. The variances and disagreements amplify as legal and religious frameworks get overlaid on conceptions of justice. No theory of justice has yet compelled universal agreement, nor have decisive arguments been given for why a single all-encompassing view should be the necessary goal of philosophic, legal, or religious theorizing.

This diversity in conceptions of justice is not a bar to consistency or coherence. For example, one committed pluralist, Michael Walzer, has argued that each category of goods in modern liberal societies — money, commodities, political power, education, love, divine grace — has its own logic of distribution based on the meaning of the good. If each "sphere" of justice was autonomous and inviolate, then a "complex equality" could be achieved since the advantages obtained in one sphere would not entail general advantages that enabled some citizens to dominate the rest.[6] For example, it would be seen as unjust for those with money to thereby have political or educational advantages merely by virtue of their wealth. With autonomous spheres in which inequalities were each legitimately created through accepted internal logics and ordering principles, an overall balanced equality gets formed. Thus as the good is interpreted through institutions and systems and shaped by individual beliefs, the conception of a just allocation changes and the substance of justice is transformed.

Significant, persistent, and unavoidable conflicts about the substance of justice may be endemic to diverse societies seeking to be democratic. But moral pluralists need not insist that conceptions of the substance of justice are necessarily particular. There may be some minimal requirements of justice (such as prohibitions against murder, deception, and gross cruelty) that are universal by virtue of being common outcomes of social processes rather than by being entailed by rational argument.[7] Opponents in moral and political conflicts over matters of justice might also universally agree to certain deliberative procedures to adjudicate disagreements. Fair dealings are "invariably valued" in "most cultures, places, and times" and can arguably be considered the primary form of justice: take all perspectives into account, or "hear the other side."[8] A balanced consideration of pros and cons is common to ordinary individual deliberation taken as fair; it is structured into institutions charged with public decision-making, from school boards to legislatures and courts, and it is the hallmark of leadership councils, from corporate boardrooms to presidential cabinets (as well as less illustrious assemblies).

A claim for reasonableness (hear all sides through established institutions) is compelling both to rationality and to other forms of moral decision-making in ways that particular outcomes of such deliberations are not. Moreover, the social institutions created to handle contrary claims will be historically contingent and vary both cross-culturally and among different domains of particular societies. Similarly, what counts as hearing sides, voicing arguments, citing precedents and the like will vary in different deliberative bodies and be balanced differently. Yet this habit of balancing competing perspectives and considering others' experiences is the ground of respect for diversity, suggesting a phenomenological basis for deliberative rationality and institutions.

The persistence of moral conflicts and disagreements about the substance of justice produces a need for modes of conflict resolution that avoid might making right, or domination by force and tyranny. Political conflicts are not always resolved rationally, deliberatively, or within the frameworks of established institutions. So-called realists have long argued that only power (particularly force of arms and

economic strength) can guarantee the security necessary for civil society and its diverse institutions and social arrangements. It seems that rulers' responsibility to the well-being of the state and its citizens trumps any claims for moral probity, so lying, stealing, or murdering have their place in effective political action. Power struggles will not necessarily be curbed by moral considerations beyond some brief hesitation before they get overridden. Yet since conflicts will be resolved either by argument or force, citizens should be skilled in the arts of deliberation if tyranny is not to rule. Because rationality is a weak bond, and likely to fail at crucial points, pluralist citizens need additional principles and methods of action that command their loyalty and secure civil society despite multiple conceptions of the right and good.

Citizens cannot be secure in their pluralism if at critical moments of moral and political conflict, the only choices are appeasement or surrender. The first line of defense is the formation of vibrant, participatory democratic institutions that guarantee equal voice in deliberations. But even if this is achieved, some citizens may not experience certain deliberative outcomes as just, so they need institutions that ensure an equality of force to all sides. This need propels the development of strategic militant nonviolence, which links moral suasion with force of sufficient power to combat even armed opposition, but that does not tyrannize.[9] Nonviolent actions, even when civilly disobedient and coercive, adhere to principles (last resort, proportionality, publicity, preservation of life) that are sufficiently minimal to draw assent from a wide diversity of moral perspectives and groups.[10] Democratic citizens have no recourse to moral theories to resolve disputes outside those created through processes of deliberation and struggle, so they best become skilled in the arts of each if justice is to have meaning in a secure society.

Moral Struggle and Citizenship

Belying U.S. practices, politics should not be a spectator sport any more than elections should be commodity purchases. Public debate on moral matters has devolved into media sound-bite campaigns under the sway of the highest bidder and thus subject to cynical manipulation. Seasonal voting on issues and candidates packaged and marketed with little regard for truth mocks citizenship, and enables politicians and those who buy their power to rule in our stead. By calling us citizens when we are not, politicians mystify democracy and provide ideological cover for the emerging plutocracy.

Democratic citizenship is hard work that requires a sustained commitment. If citizenship is merely about what we are entitled to from the state and what minimal loyalties and obligations we owe in return, the very possibility of democracy is imperiled. If we cannot authentically participate in the direction of society, we cannot be full citizens. Democratic citizenship must be understood as the actual creation of civil society and the state, and as the concomitant struggle for justice that provides the possibility of equal citizenship, of genuinely equal rights, opportunities, and capacities to govern or rule.

Since moral conflict cannot be avoided in politics, and diverse conceptions of justice yield competing substantive aims for policy, it is crucial for democratic life

that institutional and individual capacities for deliberation in a context of disagreement become strongly developed.[11] Unlike most political doctrines that depend on a moral guarantee that is independent of democratic deliberative processes, pluralist democratic citizens do not look beyond their own deliberative activities for the warrant of public policy. This does not mire citizens in relativism, nor undermine accountability; deliberative principles and processes must be defended on moral grounds. Although the principles, processes and grounds are imperfect and incomplete, three basic conditions warranting deliberation — reciprocity, publicity, and accountability — entail some substantive as well as procedural content and value.[12] Specifically, deliberative processes must recognize the moral agency of participants, seek agreement through shared reasons and reflection in public venues, and require mutual accountability among those who deliberate (as well as among those they represent). These principles and processes, as well as the nature of the goods, opportunities, and liberties to which they apply, are indeterminate outside the deliberative process itself. The empirical knowledge central to political debate is similarly imperfect and incomplete; here too claims must be consistent with reliable methods of inquiry that themselves change and are shaped within ongoing deliberative processes. Within a democratic culture, moral and political deliberation is self-limiting (constrained by principles) and also self-transforming (in that principles and the content of deliberation are altered through expanded understandings achieved through further processes of deliberation).[13]

Democracies that provide for active citizenship through participatory civil and governance institutions are more demanding from a moral point of view than democracies that operate through political pressures on procedural practices largely closed to citizens without influence, or that operate within moral absolutist paradigms. While a robust participation in the formation of society benefits both individuals and the nation, it must be recognized that this kind of citizenship demands involvement in governance that is more typical of politicians than ordinary members of society. Additionally, such engaged citizenship faces a problem of scale since the masses that comprise the nation lack the connections and communication required for participatory deliberations and decisions. But active citizenship has real meaning at the level of the community where our most heartfelt plural identities get enacted through organizations and institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques, unions, parties, civic and service groups) in the realm of "middle democracy."[14]

In this realm, self-determination is not abstract, and the pluralist citizens engaged in these ways are both more likely to be resistant to ideological manipulation and to demand that their state and national representatives be accountable. Pluralism in this sense makes citizens safer and protects democracy even though multiple commitments and loyalties also engender or amplify conflicts. Additionally, given the limits of any one person's knowledge, experience, feelings and imagination, the participation of other citizens who are both similarly and differently situated strengthens the warrant of moral deliberations and decisions. Moreover, nations with wide involvement in moral and political deliberations seem less likely to commit the atrocities and create the human catastrophes that totalitarian or closed

societies have shown propensities toward. The extension of political agency throughout the population will make public institutions and citizenship itself central resources for combating injustice without making absolutist distinctions between good and evil.

The diverse allegiances of pluralist life build some moral conflict into the system and thus encourage loyalty both for and against the state. Yet the more that citizens participate in a wide range of activities that form community, the more these conflicts find voice and then possible resolution within democratic institutions. Pluralist citizens are also more likely to shape patriotism within larger moral frames that undercut narrow jingoistic faiths based upon presumed universals or absolutist positions.[15] Citizens' eternal vigilance to secure liberty, justice, and equal participation makes them "'all patriots [who] are potential traitors'" since they will struggle against the outcome of fair deliberations that still seem substantively unjust, and they will also challenge governments that defy fundamental democratic principles.[16] Such citizens are the antidote to tyranny, the guardians of democracy, and the engines of justice.

CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATION

An engaged citizenry that enables pluralism and moral diversity to thrive in communities promises a form of democratic life that contrasts starkly with the alienated disinterest common today, and suggests an aim for education that would be salutary for life in schools. Nearly a century ago, Dewey argued that education for democracy must involve students in collaborative efforts to solve meaningful problems.[17] Ever since, progressives have advocated citizenship formation through public school learning communities that actively deliberate on important matters affecting justice and the future of the nation. But conservative forces have countered these efforts and insisted on the primacy of institutional authority over students' autonomy, of set answers over generative questions, and of instrumental instruction over educative experience. The political success of these forces has meant that narrow vocationalism has trumped capacity-building for life-long learning and career development, and that conformity and obedience to standards distorted by dominant ideologies have supplanted independence and the creative transformation of social problems. The conservative agenda has turned citizens into consumers preoccupied with making insubstantial choices from a thin menu of options. Schooling's ranking and sorting regimes undermine the personal and political agency of most students (especially from among the poor and communities of color), so it is little surprise that adults lack the confidence to deliberate on the pressing issues confronting the nation. A learned passivity and dependence on "experts" leaves most citizens out of the debates that determine the country's future.

Unfortunately, the school reform movement of the past two decades has reinforced the limits constructed by this conservative past; it has paid scant attention to the requirements of democracy and instead it has been dominated by global economic logics.[18] Schooling for the masses is increasingly confined to technical literacy and numeracy, further abandoning public education's broad humanistic and democratic aims. Schools invent service-learning experiences that are largely

paternalistic acts of charity that actually undercut the possibility of citizenship that struggles for justice and the elimination of the conditions that prompt such "service." A backlash grows against the cultural spaces in schools that support pluralist identities, defining these narrowly in opposition to national unity.[19] Fixed standards dictate curricula that ignore the depth and range of students' backgrounds and knowledge, and substitute demeaning assessments and labels for teachers' professional judgments. The dispositions and habits needed for democratic citizenship cannot flourish in this system.[20] Schools contribute more than ever before to the disabling of the many spheres of community life that support the participatory, meaning-giving activities central to pluralism. Is it any wonder that youth have become more alienated and violent, and find schools to be increasingly irrelevant to their most deeply felt concerns?

As the old union song memorializing Joe Hill emphasizes, the point of highlighting these developments is not to mourn the defeat of progressive aims, but to spur us to more effective organizing. The dominance of the conservative agenda is indeed an outcome of particular moral and political deliberations, though not within procedures or institutions that insure that every voice has an equal opportunity to be heard and influence the decisions made. If we want schools to serve democratic aims, we must amplify the voices of those who are systematically excluded from educational, economic, and political policy debates. When the dominant powers attempt to keep these voices outside the discussions and marginal to the deliberative institutions that impact schools, nonviolent interventions can penetrate these barriers to participation. Well-crafted and strategically deployed actions can recast the terms of debate and rally support.

With sufficient moral and political force, schools can be reclaimed by communities and reshaped to serve the developmental needs of their children rather than simply the economic needs of the elites. Public schools can be sites of citizenship formation when students' skills and talents are enabled to flourish, and when students and schools are deeply connected to the diverse groups and organizations that comprise the community. Philosophers of education can play an especially important role in these struggles for justice and democracy. Our responsibility is not simply to proclaim principles and expect the force of our logic to compel right action, but rather it is to interpret the culture in public arenas, calling attention to the contradictions between the espoused ethics and theories of justice and the social practice. Our challenge is not to succumb to the'"illusion of the epoch" and the mystifications of the dominant ideology, but to instead make justice part of the living fabric of social life and a preoccupation of citizenship. In this way, moral conflict, dutifully deliberated upon and responsibly acted out by engaged citizens, produces a stronger and more just democracy. Moreover, each citizen and each particular conception of the good becomes stronger and more just in the process. When we succeed in turning schools toward shaping such active citizens, we will be able to create a democracy that honors the promise of this nation.

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1. Stuart Hampshire, *Justice Is Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), xi.

2. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Michael S. Katz, Nel Noddings, and Kenneth A. Strike, eds., *Justice and Caring* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) explore some common ground among moral theories.

3. The position developed here draws on Stuart Hampshire's arguments in *Justice is Conflict, Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) and *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). A related view is suggested by Nel Noddings, in *Women and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

4. For example, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) defended liberalism by arguing for a principle of equality of general life opportunities coupled with a difference principle to constrain inequities in the distributions of goods; in contrast, Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), defended libertarianism by arguing for a conception of justice based on inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property.

5. Stuart Hampshire and Michael Walzer are perhaps most notable. See especially Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

6. David Miller and Michael Walzer, eds., *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), provides a wide-ranging critique and discussion of *Spheres of Justice*.

7. Michael Walzer, "Interpretation and Social Criticism" in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. S.M. McMurrin (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988).

8. Hampshire, *Conflict is Justice*, 4.

9. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), and, *National Security Through Civilian-based Defense* (Omaha: Association for Transarmament Studies, 1985).

10. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); also, R.S. Powers and W.B. Vogele, eds., *Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action from ACT-UP to Women's Suffrage* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997).

11. Deliberative principles are extensively analyzed in Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 224.

14. Ibid.

15. For a provocative debate on the possibility of a citizen of the world, see Joshua Cohen, ed., *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism, Martha Nussbaum and Respondents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

16. Michael Walzer, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 222, quoting Morton Grodzin, *The Loyal and the Disloyal: Social Boundaries of Patriotism and Treason* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966), 213.

17. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966).

18. Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds., *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

19. Walter Feinberg, *Common Schools / Uncommon Identities: National Unity and Cultural Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

20. Donald Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).