

Democracy Without Ideology?

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Ockham's razor or the principle of parsimony has come down to us as the claim of the fourteenth century philosopher, William of Ockham, that theoretical entities must not be multiplied unnecessarily. Less famous but similarly parsimonious is the claim by Antonio Gramsci that ideological elements are usefully minimized in social scientific theory.¹ In what follows I will apply Gramsci's razor to democratic theory considered as a central tenet of educational theory. I will identify what might reasonably be meant by ideological elements in a social scientific theory and contrast them to nonideological elements. Then I will describe how democracy functions ideologically in educational theory and, following John Dewey, will offer a nonideological democratic theory of education. Finally, I will discuss in Gramscian terms an advantage that nonideological theory exercises over ideological theory.

IDEOLOGICAL VERSUS NONIDEOLOGICAL THEORY

I frame my description of ideological and nonideological theory in terms of realist philosopher Gustav Bergmann's logical analysis of ideology. Bergmann's analysis is based on the cognitive-noncognitive distinction. Statements that can be considered true or false are cognitive statements and statements that cannot be considered true or false are noncognitive statements.² On the basis of the cognitive/noncognitive distinction, we may safely stipulate two things: (1) Neither "Hooray for democracy in education!" nor "Boo on democracy in education!" will ever be cognitive statements. (2) Although value judgments are not themselves statements of fact, it is a statement of fact to say that a certain person makes a value judgment.

Bergmann uses the cognitive-noncognitive distinction to describe nonideological social science and ideological social science. In order to clearly distinguish cognitive and noncognitive statements in social science theory Bergmann sets the bar high for cognitive statements. He describes them in terms of laws and causal claims. Bergmann describes laws as tools used to "predict what will happen if an object of a specified kind finds itself in a specified environment," and, he continues, "To look for laws is, of course, to look for causes." Specifying the analysis further Bergmann identifies

the three groups of causal factors that must in principle be represented in all laws of behavior science: the environmental conditions... and... the two kinds of state variables, the individual's needs, and his knowledge. There is, in addition, a further group of variables, biologically determined and known as "individual differences." (208)

On this account of nonideological theory in the social sciences Bergmann builds his account of ideological theory. He does so by examining a particular set of what he has labeled state variables, namely, propositional states — those beliefs about why we behave the way we behave — as among the causal factors that determine our behavior. This system of actual and potential propositional states are a person's rationale, and those propositions in a person's rationale related most directly to that person's needs are that person's motives (209).

Using this inventory of principal causal factors in behavioral science Bergmann concedes that all rationales contain propositions that are value judgments and act as very powerful motives. From this claim he draws out a description of ideological theory in the social sciences:

The motive power of a value judgment is often greatly increased when it appears within the rationale of those who hold it not under its proper logical flag as a value judgment but in the disguise of a statement of fact. A statement of this kind...I shall call an "ideological statement." A rationale or an important part of a rationale that contains in logically crucial places ideological statements I shall call an "ideology." And, finally, I call man an "ideological animal" because, at least up to this point in history, his rationales were more often than not ideologies. (210, emphasis in original)

In brief, then, the problem of ideology in social science theory is a classic case of category mistake. Statements of value (noncognitive statements) are substituted — without acknowledgement — at logically crucial places where statements of fact (cognitive statements) are needed.

IDEOLOGICAL AND NONIDEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

Ken Kyle and Charles Jenks have summarized what may be called the standard approach to democratic theory in education. In their 2002 *Educational Studies* article "The Theoretical and Historical Case for Democratic Education in the United States," they abstract the structure of their argument as follows:

Working from the position that the fundamental purpose of education should be the preparation of informed, engaged, democratic citizens, we discuss the guiding principles behind democratic education and its ramifications. Specifically, we outline the principles that underlie participatory democracy. We discuss the two ways to address the relationship between democratic values and educational institutions, and we consider some of the requirements of teaching democratic values in light of the insights gleaned from the development of identity politics. Furthermore, in anticipation of critics and naysayers, we present examples highlighting the success of earlier attempts at preparing students for active democratic citizenship.³

Note my focus on the structure of Kyle and Jenks's argument. I have little quarrel with the content of the essay and admit it is generally accurate in what it says, articulate in its expression, and agreeable to me in its moral outlook. Note, however, that the argument begins with an ideological statement presented as a factual premise. At the logically crucial beginning point, Kyle and Jenks claim that the fundamental purpose of education *should* be the preparation of informed, engaged, Democratic citizens. Nothing supports it but the claim itself. Because the argument begins with a moral claim, opponents of the argument can interpret — and dismiss — the claim as the noncognitive or emotivist or expressive statement, "Hooray for democracy in education!"

After subverting the argument in this way, the naysayers and critics towards whom Kyle and Jenks address their further factual premises as to past successes of democratic education are no longer listening. This argumentative pattern, an example of G.E. Moore's open question argument, turns on the fact that of any claim that "X is good" it may always be asked "What do you mean by good?"⁴ Statement of opinion in ethics, in other words, always opens meta-ethical questions. Once those meta-ethical questions are opened argument turns away from establishing the truth

of the original proposition and towards establishing the logical status, in this case the cognitive or noncognitive status, of the original claim. That is enough to undo the argument because it shows that truths are difficult to derive from premises that themselves may be neither true nor false.⁵

Acutely aware of the immense logical difference between ideological and nonideological statements, Dewey explained their difference in his 1938 article “The Determination of Ultimate Values or Aims through Antecedent or A Priori Speculation or Empirical Inquiry,” by saying that philosophical and scientific discourse differ fundamentally. “What is implied in the constructive ideas of philosophy,” Dewey remarks, “is that they have authority over activity to impel it to bring possible values into existence, not, as in the case of science, that they have authoritative claim to acknowledgement because they are already part of the order of nature.”⁶ It may have been recognition of this difference that motivated Dewey to lay down the rudiments of a cognitive approach to democratic theory in education in another work from 1938, *Experience and Education*. There Dewey identifies two universal features of experience, continuity and interaction, and asserts in articulation of his theory of educative experience that “Continuity and interaction in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience.”⁷ Whatever the truth status of this claim may turn out to be in the long run, its logical status is immediately recognizable as that of a cognitive statement. Unlike the noncognitive claim on which Kyle and Jenks base their defense of democratic theory in education, Dewey’s claim is either true or false. However, at least two questions may seem left unanswered at this point: how can we know that Dewey’s view is appropriately nonideological? How can we know that Dewey’s view is appropriately democratic?

SOME DETAILS OF DEWEY’S VIEW

Nonideological statement of Dewey’s theory does not compromise its status as a democratic theory. When Dewey says he is offering a theory of educative experience, the sort of experience in which Dewey has an interest is personal experience. Dewey defines interaction in a personal experience as the transaction of the external (physical and social) environment encompassed in an experience with the internal state (the needs, desires, capacities, purposes, and such) of the person having that experience. Suitability of external environment to inner state enhances interaction. Because events and things continue over time, the second main variable of Dewey’s theory, continuity, makes reference to a person’s past, present, and future. Thus, full assessment of the continuous quality of an experience must include an evaluation of what the person having the experience brings to the experience, the salience of the present experience for that person, and the effect of present experience on future experience. When continuity is influenced positively by interaction the result is enhancement of the potential for continued growth of the learner, described by Dewey as a widening of the possibilities for experiences in the future. When interaction influences continuity negatively the result is limitation of the learner’s control of future experiences and diminishment of the learner’s power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations.

Because continuity and interaction are qualities of personal experience, the theory of education Dewey puts forward is a phenomenological theory. Elements of the phenomenology of the educative act provide a basis from which to make concrete recommendations to educators as to how to think about their work in ways that promise to improve the educative effects of their pedagogical efforts. In short, teaching requires observation of, response to, and improvement in the life-worlds of students.⁸ This is the very stuff of participatory democracy.

Still, we may wonder whether Dewey's view is not also ideological in character. Bergmann is again helpful. Considering the possibility that all rationales are ideologies, a claim he attributes to Karl Mannheim, Bergmann rejects that view, arguing that it is invalidated by failing to distinguish between the logical analysis of statements and the sociological analysis of them.⁹ The former is prior to the latter, and the distinction between cognitive and noncognitive trumps the presumption that all rationales are ideological. It is open for a defender of the claim that all rationales are ideologies to show that all rationales *must* be ideologies; but entering upon this line of reasoning causes even greater difficulties for someone making the claim. As Bergman argues: "If this proposition that every rationale is an ideology is itself objectively true, how can he know it? If it is not, why should we pay any attention to it? And what, in particular, is the value of a social science thus construed?" Mannheim, Bergmann notes, answers this last question by saying that social scientists can compare ideologies and construct composites that find wider acceptance and create progress. But Bergmann objects, "To expose the weakness of this argument, one merely needs to ask: Progress towards what?...A subjectivist cannot in this manner define progress and, in particular, approximation toward an objective truth whose very existence he in principle denies" (213).

Things look brighter for nonideological theory. There, Bergmann continues,

one can at least consistently maintain that this rationale itself is not an ideology....I should also be able to explain causally why the other side errs and why that which is happily my own beholds the truth without ideological distortion. (213-4)

In the case of educational theory, Dewey offers a causal explanation of the sort Bergmann claims available to nonideological approaches to social scientific theory. That causal explanation, developed in terms of a familiar Deweyan critique of the human tendency to think in terms of either-ors, is summed up in Dewey's observation in *Experience and Education* that "The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without." Indeed, Dewey proposes his theory of the continuous and interactional quality of an experience as the measure of its educative significance precisely to transcend this ideological debate. Dewey says in the preface to *Experience and Education* that

It is the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties.¹⁰

Dewey effects this plan by contending that democracy *causes* improved learning. Here we have a case of an objective, that is, nonideological, value commitment to the importance of democracy to educational theory and in educational practice.

It may be objected that Dewey has not effected resolution of conflict with his theory but simply replaced one dualistic melodrama for another. After all, the justification for his view developed above relies on the dichotomous distinction between cognitive and noncognitive statements. For this reason it seems that exclusion of value statements from educational theory does nothing more than reproduce either-or thinking in educational theory.

However, it is a mistake to read nonideological theory as excluding all value judgments. Rather, value judgments are recognized as such and removed from logically crucial places such as the beginning of argument. Bergmann makes this point explicitly:

value judgments as such are not ideological... If one is so overimpressed with science that he deprecates all value judgments as ideological simply because they are not scientific, he will perhaps also reject as futile that reflective, critical, and, in an obvious sense, highly rational discourse about values without which life is not worth living... One danger of this attitude is greatest in our rulers and those who assist them or wish to assist them as experts. They may think that they still act as scientists when, in fact, they act as policy-makers. This, as we all know to our sorrow, is the soil in which callousness and fanaticism thrive... If I am to be consistent, I must call ideology every rationale, no matter how explicit and articulate on the fact-value issue and other fundamental questions, that assimilates facts and values to each other in a way in which the tradition in which I stand insists that this cannot be done. (215)

This observation allows for the possibility of what Bergmann calls “scientific ideologies”: “What marks them is either fallacious logic or statements of fact and theory extremely implausible on the evidence that was available to the author... more often than not the results of motivational pressure... congenial to his values” (215). In this regard we may contrast Dewey’s view to that of Edward Thorndike. Indeed, it was this sort of Thorndikian scientific ideology that marked the rise of progressive education as an educational ideology and set in motion the conflict of ideas, the “ism-ism” game, which Dewey attempted to resolve in *Experience and Education*.

In this regard it is useful to contrast the scientism or scientific ideology of Thorndike to Dewey’s less objectionable scientific views. Kieran Egan and Jan Smedslund have shown that statements of the form mistaken by Thorndike as stating laws of educational science fail to establish useful guidelines for an empirical approach to education research because, strictly speaking, they are not laws. Instead, they are definitions. For example, the law of effect, Thorndike’s claim that people tend to repeat behaviors that have pleasurable consequences, is a disguised analytic statement. Rather than establish empirical relationships between or among distinct things, the law of effect offers a partial definition of its first term.

This faulty logic puts education research in the embarrassing position of empirically testing the truth of a statement already made true by conceptual relations among the terms it contains. Law of effect in hand, education researchers are left

only with the problem of finding out what is considered a pleasurable consequence among particular populations in particular circumstances. However, those findings are arbitrary in the sense that they describe only the population studied at the time it is studied and provide no ground for generalization to other populations and other circumstances. On this understanding of its function, education research is often required to stand, as it were, on one foot at a time, never able to place both feet firmly on the ground in its attempt to undertake empirical study of the world. As Egan explains it, "The analytic element generalizes absolutely. The arbitrary component cannot be generalized at all."¹¹

Bergmann suggests that in the social sciences when laws are offered the danger of scientific ideology exists because

the laws proposed and even the variables entering them may well be determined at least in part and either consciously or unconsciously, by the values of the author. Practically this is, I believe, one of the most important mechanisms by which scientific ideologies establish themselves as social science. (217)

The seemingly sinister valuational commitment behind the illogic practiced by Thorndike is also fairly well known. Stephen Tomlinson describes political relations among teachers, administrators, and researchers embedded in Thorndike's eugenicist worldview. By adopting a Thorndikian approach to schooling educators implicitly commit to an intellectual elitist view of school politics. As Tomlinson says,

On the whole, Thorndike cautioned, ordinary people were better off not thinking for themselves but following the wisdom of their intellectual superiors. Social progress depended upon the creation of a paternal society, cemented by sentiments of stewardship and deference, in which the cognitive elite were vested with the power to direct the masses toward a common good. In the case of schooling, this natural order was reflected in a system where researchers and administrators provided scientific knowledge and organisational control while teachers contributed their labour and unconditional loyalty.¹²

Unlike Thorndike, Dewey leaves the variables involved in his attempt at a science of education open to empirical inspection and thereby endorses a democratic school politics. The theory urges us to find out empirically when students are, for educational purposes, best treated as species beings, as members of groups of varying scopes, or relatively or absolutely as individuals. This explains why identity politics is so important to the development of theory and practice in education without invoking the moral propriety of critical examination of identities or offering ideological platitudes about how we are each other's best instructors.¹³

Instead, because Dewey's theory proceeds nonideologically we learn from it that critical, empirical examination of identity is a necessary condition of bringing the greatest educational significance possible to bear on school experiences. On this view, the value commitment of any educator to the importance of, say, the idea of identity does not arise and terminate in moral approbation and outrage. Rather, it emerges out of nonideological commitment to improving the educative significance of school experience and may be more strongly held on this account. This shift in commitment is important for two reasons. First, and locally, it certifies that Dewey's view does not attempt exclusion of all value judgments from education theory. It simply endorses replacement of them with cognitive statements as starting points for

theorizing in education. Secondly, and more globally, Dewey's nonideological approach serves as an important weapon in the war for educational hegemony.

A NEW POSSIBILITY IN THE STRUGGLE FOR EDUCATIONAL HEGEMONY

Kyle and Jenks are correct to call their initial, arguably noncognitive claim that democracy *should* guide education a positional claim. Logically speaking this claim does position the struggle for ascendancy of democratic thought in educational theory and, more importantly, educational practice. But if this is true then it explains in part why the struggle has gone on so long and why the struggle may seem at times so fruitless.

Recently, *The Clearing House*, as part of a special issue honoring outgoing executive editor Bob Shuman, reprinted some articles from past issues. Two in particular, one from the 1940s and another from the 1930s, seem especially relevant to the present discussion. Reading these articles from long ago with titles both promising and alarming — “6 Steps to Pupil Participation in Democratic School Control” and “Authoritarianism: Enslaving Yoke of Nations and Schools” — is like taking a step into the present.¹⁴ I am willing to wager that examination of the program of any educational society or association with a stated commitment to democratic education will reveal a plethora of papers with practical advice and moral condemnation for those currently in charge of schools. Yet, to borrow a phrase from the school desegregation literature, even after at least a half-century of extreme ideological effort, schools are still enslaving, still undemocratic.

A point made by David Larabee, quoted with epigraphic approval by Kyle and Jenks, expresses the opinion that “Before we launch yet another research center (to determine ‘what works’ in the classroom) or propose another organizational change (such as school choice or a national curriculum), we need to engage in a public debate about the desirability of alternative social outcomes by schooling.”¹⁵ The problem with this statement is that it assumes or entails or reveals that dialogue about education tends to proceed as if effectiveness in education stands in inverse proportion to ethicality in education. Or as Dewey might have said, the problem with Larabee's battle cry is that it separates means from ends in education.

Instead of seeing and saying that democracy and educational effectiveness are incompatible, democrats in education are better served by arguing that these two things exist simultaneously as effective means and valuable ends, the value of the ends deriving in part from the effectiveness of the means. Dewey's nonideological approach to the role of democracy in education warrants democratic theorists in education to appropriate the language of *what does work* in education and explain on the basis of that cognitive account *what should be going on* in education. It is a difficult task in any case to talk people into giving up effectiveness for ethicality, and this may be especially true where stakes are seen to be as high as they are in education. But if it is shown that the two go together, an argumentative advantage is gained.

What many may take to be solely the struggle over educational goals is a struggle over hegemonic control of American schooling. This involves us in what

Gramsci describes as a war of position, a war in which socialist forces have to take civil society before they take the state.¹⁶ Crucial to the taking of civil society is having a better idea, portraying it as such, and gathering popular support for its value.

The question arises whether a theoretical “truth” discovered in correspondence with a specific practice can be generalized and deemed universal... The proof of its universality consists precisely in that which it can become: (1) a stimulus to know better the concrete reality of a situation different from the one in which it was discovered (and this is the prime measure of its fecundity); (2) when it has stimulated and helped this better understanding of concrete reality, it incorporates itself into this reality as if it were originally an expression of it.¹⁷

Causal ordering is of critical importance to this statement. If a theoretical truth is to find widespread acceptance it must first prove useful in concrete reality by presenting itself as a matter of fact, a stimulus to greater understanding of the phenomena with which it is concerned. Then, after it has proven its usefulness in practice, it will gain expressive statement not merely as the better idea about reality but as reality itself. Presentation first as fact and then as value puts science ahead of ideology. If democrats in education wish to win the war of position in which they are engaged, they are well advised to reverse the argumentative process of the standard defense of democracy in education. Dewey’s nonideological approach to democratic education makes that reversal possible and raises hope for progress in the struggle for hegemonic control of schooling.

1. Neither Ockham nor Gramsci actually use the “razor” metaphor. What Ockham says, according to Ockham scholar Ernest A. Moody in his “William of Ockham” contribution to *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Volume 8*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 307, is “What can be done with fewer [assumptions] is done in vain with more.” What Gramsci says is “Marxism demands a constant confrontation with a historically determined culture, together with the effort to supersede it — that is, to make that culture scientific by removing every trace of ideology.” See Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, trans. Lynne Lawner (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 45.

2. Gustav Bergmann, “Ideology,” *Ethics* 61, no. 3 (1951), 206. This essay will be cited by parenthetical page number in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Ken Kyle and Charles Jenks, “The Theoretical and Historical Case for Democratic Education in the United States,” *Educational Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002), 150.

4. See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 5–6.

5. For a discussion of the relation of meta-ethical issues to issues in educational theory see William T. Blackstone, “Metaethics and Value Conflicts in Education,” *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society* (Lawrence, Kans.: Ernest E. Bayles, 1963): 9–17.

6. John Dewey, “The Determination of Ultimate Values or Aims Through Antecedent or A Priori Speculation or Empirical Inquiry,” in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 263–4.

7. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 44–5. Material in the following paragraph summarizes Dewey’s approach to the quoted claim. See 35–44 in *Experience and Education*.

8. Dewey’s theory comprises all of the principle variables of behavior science listed by Bergmann. For discussion of the elements of the life-world see Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed. Helmut R. Wagner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 73.

9. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 1985).

10. Dewey, *Education and Experience*, 17 and 5, respectively.
11. Kieran Egan, "The Analytic and the Arbitrary in Educational Research," in *Children's Minds, Talking Rabbits, and Clockwork Oranges: Essays on Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999): 169–81, and Jan Smedslund, "Between the Analytic and the Arbitrary: A Case Study in Psychological Research," *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 20, no. 3 (1979): 129–40. The quote from Egan may be found on pages 175–6 of "The Analytic and the Arbitrary in Educational Research."
12. Stephen Tomlinson, "Edward Lee Thorndike and John Dewey on the Science of Education," *Oxford Review of Education* 23, no. 3 (1997), 371.
13. For examples, see Kyle and Jenks, "Theoretical and Historical Case for Democratic Education in the United States," 156–8.
14. E.C. Bolmeier, "6 Steps to Pupil Participation in Democratic School Control" (1947) and Ernest O. Melby, "Authoritarianism: Enslaving Yoke of Nations and Schools" (1938), *The Clearing House* 79, no. 5 (2006): 198–201 and 224–7, respectively.
15. David F. Larabee, "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals," *American Educational Journal* 34 (1997), 40–1.
16. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 229.
17. As quoted from Joseph V. Femia, *Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 17.