

## Reflections on the “counter” in educational counterpublics

*“To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms”<sup>1</sup>*

In his work, Christopher Martin defends an expansion of Habermasian discourse ethics to include an important account of the norms and standards of socialization that can be defended through a process of practical moral deliberation in the public sphere. The careful articulation of this account not only makes an important contribution to scholarship in the field of discourse ethics, but offers a robust theoretical framework for conceptualizing the intrinsic relationship between educational value and public moral value.

Given the current climate of educational policy changes and the accompanying clamour of political and popular debate on the purposes of education, it may seem as if we need this account now more than ever. In the past few years, many of us here in the UK have witnessed what Stephen Ball<sup>2</sup> has described as a “dismemberment” of the English education system, resulting in an often bewildering array of different kinds of educational provision as well as a disruption of the very language in which debates about education are commonly framed (for example, terms like “private” versus “public”, while perhaps never representing a totally clear opposition, are now more intertwined than ever, and the term “free school” means something entirely different from what it used to mean). On the face of it, there is a great deal of confusion over which educational aims are morally and publicly defensible. In the scramble to defend public education from the forces of marketization and to resist the language of consumerism and management in schools, it is often easy to lose sight of what exactly is being defended, and why. This is partly because, as Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz discuss in their excellent contribution to a recent special issue of *Educational Theory* on this question, it is difficult to articulate the original aims and ambitions of a truly “public” system of public schooling and to seriously address the ways in which state schools may be failing to fulfil many of these aims when there “are so many who

---

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Swallow Press, 1954 (1927)), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Ball, “Free Schools: Our Education System has Been Dismembered in Pursuit of Choice”, *The Guardian, Comment is Free*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2013.

seem ready to seize any pretext to call the whole project into question.”<sup>3</sup> These difficulties are exacerbated by the well-documented disappearance, in modern, or post-modern, society, of an actual public sphere both as a physical reality and an aspect of political life.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of genuinely public spaces, what little “public” debate there is often gets framed in a reductive way in which it is very difficult to move beyond predefined categories, catch-phrases or ideological positions. For example, in debates on contemporary English education policy in the popular press, in online forums, or at public events, it is common to hear “traditionalists” pitted against “progressivists” and “subject knowledge” pitted against “moral education” or “character building”, as if these ideas represent clearly identifiable, comprehensive and mutually exclusive positions, while “choice” is seen as synonymous with “diversity” and “competition” as necessarily leading to “innovation”. At the same time, participants in such public discussions often voice ideas about education that were once rooted in a critical, radical perspective on society and social change, but that now appear uprooted from this context and presented merely as a recipe for educational success, as in the following statement from former Secretary of State for Education:

“Education has an emancipatory, liberating, value. I regard education as the means by which individuals can gain access to all the other goods we value – cultural, social and economic – on their terms. I believe education allows individuals to become authors of their own life story.”<sup>5</sup>

Statements like this assume that questions such as what goods we value, why we value them, or indeed who the “we” is, have already been settled and are not themselves part of any debate about the content, process or control of education. Yet this assumption is, in my view, both conceptually mistaken and politically dangerous. It is, however, one that is rarely questioned within the mainstream political and educational discourse, and it is precisely

---

<sup>3</sup> Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “What Makes a Public School Public? A Framework for Evaluating the Civic Substance of Schooling”, *Educational Theory*, 61, no. 4 (2011): 365.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989); Nikolas Rose, “The Death of the Social? Re-figuring the Territory of Government”, *Economy and Society*, 25, no. 3 (1996); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gove, “What is Education For?”, Speech to the RSA  
<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/28666835/WHAT-IS-EDUCATION-FOR-Speech-by-Michael-Gove-MP-to-the-RSA-30> (2009)

because of this lack of questioning that I believe that, in the current climate, one has to be cautious about the quest for a unifying publicly defensible account of educational norms.

My starting point in this discussion is that ideas about what is educationally valuable and worthwhile cannot be detached from ideas about what forms of social and political organization are most morally defensible and desirable. Yet because certain assumptions about our political frameworks, institutions and processes have become so taken-for-granted that they are rarely even discussed, and because these assumptions are deeply embedded within and reinforced by particular, dominant forms of educational provision and accounts of educational aims, it is very difficult to imagine, much less to talk about education in different terms. Specifically, the framework of the (capitalist) state, and the institution of state schooling that both reinforces and reflects this framework, is rarely questioned in discussions about educational aims and values. Accordingly, educational spaces, experiments and processes that challenge this framework may struggle to get heard, and are likely to be construed as a set of demands on the system rather than a questioning of the system itself. Given this political reality, my worry is that in trying to articulate publicly defensible educational norms, we will end up reinforcing particular political positions in the guise of supposedly independently valuable educational ideas. This is not just a conceptual point, but a worry about the possibilities for articulating, enacting, imagining and defending social and political visions that may be struggling to find space in a public sphere already dominated by certain visions and narratives. Educational spaces - both formal and informal - I believe, are one of the sites in which such challenges to dominant narratives can take place, and it is vital that we preserve such spaces as part of an ongoing democratic project of improving society and the lives of individuals in society.

It is on this level of educational and political reality that I will focus in the following discussion. My discussion is informed by Nancy Fraser's important contribution to the Habermasian project of "rethinking the public sphere",<sup>6</sup> and by the work of Kathleen Knight

---

<sup>6</sup> See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere; A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990).

Abowitz<sup>7</sup>, who has offered a rich and insightful development of Fraser's theoretical account for educational policy and practice. In the following discussion, I hope to contribute to this discussion in ways which build on this work, while also complicating the picture of what the idea of a counterpublic can mean in the context of education. Where my account differs from the conception of counterpublics that I think is implicit in both Knight Abowitz and Martin's account, is that I want to emphasise a view of educational counterpublics as social, discursive spaces that can present radical challenges to our fundamental social and political ideas, over a view of counterpublics as making demands for educational access, provision and content within, and on the terms of, the existing political system. Educational counterpublics, in the sense I will explore, can be sites for imagining and articulating political ideas and images of what a different, and better, political reality could look like; as part of what Maxine Greene describes, drawing on Arendt, as opening up spaces where people can try to bring into being a common world.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Public and Counterpublics**

Nancy Fraser, while acknowledging the significance for democratic theory and politics of Habermas's concept of the public sphere as "a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern;' or 'common interest'"<sup>9</sup>, has articulated some important criticisms of Habermas's account of the historical rise of the bourgeois public sphere and its contours. As Fraser points out, "the public sphere was always constituted by conflict"<sup>10</sup>. Drawing on historical research, she discusses how "members of subordinated social groups (women, workers, people of colour and gays and lesbians) have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics"<sup>11</sup>. These groupings, which Fraser refers to as

---

<sup>7</sup> See Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Civil Society and Educational Publics: Possibilities and Problems", in *Promises to Keep; Cultural Studies, Democratic Education and Public Life*, eds Greg Dimitriadis and Dennis Carlson (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

“subaltern counterpublics,” constitute “parallel discursive arenas”<sup>12</sup>, in which counter-discourses are formulated and circulated. Fraser’s point, however, is not just a historical one; the strand of her argument most pertinent to the current discussion is her insistence that “public life in egalitarian, multi-cultural societies cannot consist exclusively in a singular comprehensive sphere”<sup>13</sup>; and that this idea in fact only makes sense “if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics”<sup>14</sup>. Fraser’s account constitutes a serious challenge to the Habermasian assumption that “the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy”.<sup>15</sup>

I want in what follows to look more closely at this idea of counterpublics, and to ask what it would mean to consider the significance of Fraser’s account for education, and for public deliberation about education. One way to think about this question is to ask: What would constitute an educational counterpublic? It is through exploring this question that, as I will discuss, it becomes apparent just how impossible it is to separate out questions about educational norms, values and aims, from social and political questions.

Martin’s central question, which he answers through an expanded version of Habermasian discourse morality, is: “[W]hat are the conditions of socialization that all persons ought to have access to in the process of becoming individuals?”<sup>16</sup>

Yet as McMahon notes, the constructivist understanding of the Habermasian U principle, which Martin apparently adopts in formulating his own version, UE, of this principle, does not imply “a thought experiment by means of which an individual could, in theory, identify the true principles of morality. The true principles are understood as whatever principles would emerge from an *actual* dialogue among all affected—albeit, one taking place under certain idealized conditions”.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Martin, *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World; Rethinking Educational Policy and Practice Through Jürgen Habermas’ Discourse Morality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 175.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher McMahon, “Discourse and Morality”, *Ethics*, 110, no. 3 (2000): 518, my emphasis.

While Martin questions McMahon's characterization of the "strong dialogicality" in Habermas's account of these ideal conditions and its implications for his theory, the discussion throughout his book refers to "actual participants" deliberating within a fully inclusive procedure. Thus my discussion here will focus on the possibilities and problems that are likely to emerge when we consider how actual participants, in today's political reality, are likely to enter into and engage in any process of articulating and justifying educational norms.

An obvious answer to the question of what Fraser's account of counterpublics can add to our discussion of public deliberation on the value and meaning of education, is that different counterpublics are likely to have their own substantive educational values and meanings, and that this will and should inform any such public debate. There are two ways, however, in which one can understand this idea. One is that "educational counterpublics" consist of groups that challenge mainstream, hegemonic understandings of what education is and should be; e.g. that it takes place in schools; that it is controlled by the state; that it involves unequal and hierarchical relationships between children and adults, etc. In this sense, many home-schoolers, un-schoolers or advocates of libertarian education, for instance, could be seen as educational counterpublics, representing a challenge to ideas about what forms of education are most morally defensible.

Something like this perspective seems to be implied in Knight Abowitz's discussion,<sup>18</sup> where she describes the ways in which, for a variety of political and historical reasons, "in education, the public is increasingly taking the form of multiple educational publics",<sup>19</sup> with the effect that "the notion of a universal public as inherent in traditional public schooling is giving way to a more pluralistic notion of multiple publics vying for recognition and resources to pursue their educational visions"<sup>20</sup>

These educational publics, Knight Abowitz argues, "are sites where parents and educators can resist or reconstruct the state's goals for education and schooling, debate and agree upon various shared educational needs and visions, and hold the state accountable for helping them to implement these visions".<sup>21</sup> Thus educational publics, here, represent

---

<sup>18</sup> Knight Abowitz, "Civil Society and Educational Publics".

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

counterpublics in Fraser's sense in that they are "groups of citizens mobilized by their common concerns and critiques of schooling".<sup>22</sup> Yet while there certainly are many such groups in any pluralistic society, and while I agree with Knight Abowitz about the need to seriously engage with them, I suggest we need to work with a more complex idea of what an educational counterpublic consists of. While Knight Abowitz's analysis offers a valuable perspective on debates about public education in a democratic state, it suggests that the "counter" in "counterpublic" represents an already existing and coherent set of ideas about education, forged as part of the common identity of a marginalized group.

Indeed Fraser's account, Knight Abowitz argues, in emphasising the fragmented nature of the public sphere and the significant role of multiple publics and counterpublics, shows that the existence of such publics "helps to expand recognition and representation of the needs of all citizens, especially those who are marginalized within our society".<sup>23</sup>

Yet educational counterpublics, as I shall argue, can be constituted not just through expressions of such demands for recognition and representation - as, for example in the case of the Innu communities of Northern Canada whom Martin describes in the Introduction to his book and to whom he returns time and time again in his discussion, but through developing narratives that challenge dominant understandings of our current social and political reality, and articulating and imagining alternatives. What I want to defend is a broader understanding of educational counterpublics that includes the sense in which such counterpublics may be demanding not a recognition, on the part of the state, that certain ideas of what is educationally valuable be incorporated into any public account of educational aims, but a willingness to seriously question the very structures within such aims may make sense. Thus, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith has compellingly argued,<sup>24</sup> whereas demands by indigenous groups in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA may take the form of local demands for justice and recognition in light of the colonial history of dispossession, violence and cultural loss, the international indigenous social movement presents a far deeper set of challenges to the epistemological assumptions and structures of the West. There is certainly an argument to be made in terms of hearing the educational demands of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, L., *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (London: Zed Books, 1999).

communities like the Innu as justified demands on the system to accommodate their ideas about their children's educational needs and to make appropriate adjustments in policy, curriculum and pedagogy. In other words, Christopher Martin's question of what educational processes the Innu have a moral right to is an important question that should concern educational policy makers, theorists and practitioners in that context. However, if we only hear what communities like the Innu are saying as a question of what they have a right to within the existing political framework, we may miss the deeper sense in which they are asking us to think differently not just about what is educationally valuable within our society, but about what kind of society we want to live in.

These different perspectives are often reflected as tensions within radical educational movements, and I am suggesting not that we need to resolve them, but that we need to be aware of them. Rebecca Tarlau, for example, has documented how the Landless People's Movement (MST) in Brazil underwent a shift in their position in the late 1990's when, having initially invested their educational energies into setting up informal, popular education projects as an alternative to the public school system, they "began to realize that transforming public schools was necessary for the movement's social and political goals."<sup>25</sup> As Tarlau points out, the activism of the MST within public schooling in Brazil, through teacher training programmes for example, not only led to changes in curricula and pedagogical practice that enabled the inclusion of children from marginalized communities into the public school system, thus meeting some of their political demands for recognition, but also allowed them to bring their critique of the hegemonic socio-economic system represented in the public schools system into this system itself.<sup>26</sup>

The above discussion may suggest that educational counterpublics are coextensive with existing, marginalized communities. Yet Robert Asen has argued that Fraser's own theory of counterpublics in fact invites two different readings: "The first reading asserts a view of counterpublics as social, discursive entities that may not be reduced to the identity of their participants."<sup>27</sup> This reading highlights the emancipatory potential of counterpublics in the

---

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Tarlau, (2015) "How Do New Critical Pedagogies Develop? Educational Innovation, Social Change, and Landless Workers in Brazil, *Teachers College Record*, 117 (2015), 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Asen, "Seeking the 'Counter' in Counterpublics", *Communication Theory*, 10, no.4 (2006), 431.

sense that they "assist in expanding discursive space for all participants in the public sphere". The second reading "locates the 'counter' in counterpublics in the subordinated status of participants". On this reading, "dominant groups battle subordinate groups in opposing public and counterpublics", and counterpublics thus constitute a much-needed remedy in unequal societies, where "deliberative processes tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups."<sup>28</sup> It is the second reading that, I think, is that suggested in Knight Abowitz's work, and indeed in Martin's own examples of different social and cultural groups making (or rejecting) certain demands to do with the nature and scope of education in a pluralistic liberal society. I am not disagreeing with the significance of embracing this reading as part of an informed understanding of democratic theory and politics. Yet I think the first reading allows us to explore and articulate some important points about education that may be overlooked if we focus on the second reading.

Asen warns against the danger of reductionism in assuming that the "counter" of "counterpublics" is necessarily constituted in particular persons, places or topics, and Martin's own analysis does seem at times to make similar assumptions about what publics, and possibly counterpublics, can be, when he refers to the idea that "participants enter the discourse with certain culturally situated educational values in view."<sup>29</sup>

Yet not all educational values are "culturally situated"; or, at least, to the extent that they are, they are also socially and politically situated. Crucially, for participants in any real public discourse to be able to articulate, defend and engage with such values, they need to be able to appreciate the political and social context in which they make sense. Knight Abowitz defends the formation of education publics as an important element in a critical account of civil society, for, "at the very least, these alternatives offer and expand public debate on the purposes and aims of education."<sup>30</sup> Yet while I agree with this analysis, I think it is important not to lose sight of the point that what makes such publics genuinely counterpublic is that they offer a *political* challenge to the framework of values and understandings in which debates about the purposes and aims of public education are framed. As such, they illustrate the impossibility of separating these debates from a debate about how we are to live together as a society.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Martin, *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Knight Abowitz, "Civil Society and Educational Publics", 93.

Thus, for example, Knight Abowitz notes that home-schoolers "represent a counterpublic inasmuch as many of these families are seeking to escape and challenge what they consider to be the hegemonic public school system run by the government."<sup>31</sup> Yet my point is that it is important to acknowledge that homeschooling can be, for many homeschooling parents, not just a rejection of the educational values and pedagogical practices of the public school system (e.g. individual competitiveness; assessment-driven teaching; a secular, academic curriculum), but part of an attempt to embody a way of life that challenges the political framework in which this system makes sense. While in some cases, this may emerge from a substantive commitment to an alternative set of values, often grounded in the way of life and traditions of, for example, a religious community, in other cases the counterpublic nature of such alternatives may not be either grounded in a collective identity or reflected in a fully worked-out worldview. I would suggest that the latter possibility is worth considering in reflecting on the arguments put forward by academics and journalists as to why African-American parents in the USA should homeschool their children, and why increasing numbers of these parents are choosing to do so.<sup>32</sup>

Although Knight Abowitz does not claim that there is such a thing as "the home-schooling community" that share a monolithic set of values, and she devotes considerable space to exploring this issue, pointing out that homeschoolers "cannot simply be cast as religious fanatics",<sup>33</sup> she does claim that they represent a counterpublic in that they present a collective challenge to the hegemonic public schooling system. Yet by categorising homeschoolers in this way, and adopting the labels of "ideologues" or "pedagogues" to describe their differing motivations for teaching their children at home, such discussions enable us to overlook the ways in which the counter-narrative of parents who refuse to take part in the public education system can itself expand our discursive space not just in terms of what ideas about education we bring to the debate, but in terms of how we think about the kind of society we live in and the kind of society we would like to live in. It is certainly true that, as Knight Abowitz says, "Some of the exodus from traditional public schools may

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Jessica Huseman, "Why More Black Parents are Homeschooling Their Children", *Hechinger Report*, February, 2015 <http://hechingerreport.org/black-parents-homeschooling-children/>; Ama Mazama, "Struggling with Racial Biases, Black Families Homeschool Kids", *The Conversation*, April, 2015. <http://theconversation.com/struggling-with-racial-biases-black-families-homeschool-kids-38694> ; Penelope Trunk, "Why Black Kids Should be Homeschooled" <http://education.penelopetrunk.com/black-kids-should-homeschool/>

<sup>33</sup> Knight Abowitz, "Civil Society and Educational Publics", 88.

also signal the existence of multiple educational publics in which groups of citizens are forming spheres of debate and action around common identities and shared educational concepts."<sup>34</sup> But in the case of African-American parents who choose to home-school, it is not shared educational concepts or a common identity that are behind their motivations to take their children out of school, but a sense that the values of justice, equality and human dignity are not being realized by a political system which both constructs education and positions racialized groups and individuals within its power structures. Their educational approach, in this case, represents an attempt to imagine and create a different, and better, political reality, rather than a fully worked-out set of educational demands. My worry is that if we regard ideas about what education should look like as attached to already existing groups or publics, rather than as emerging from an encounter with political reality, we may fail to pay attention to two important points. Firstly, it is often not shared pre-existing educational ideas and values that constitute the "counter" in such "counterpublics", but shared political and social experience; and secondly, it is often this experience that gives rise to political and social ideas that, in turn, continue to emerge, develop and constitute a critical alternative to current reality through educational practice.

To illustrate both these points, consider the following account of an educational encounter, related by Audrey Thompson in her discussion of asymmetry in listening relations across race:

A white student in one of my classes once protested that her concerns were not being given the same validation as black people's. Because white teachers are not meeting the needs of black children, many of the African-American students in the class had argued in favor of voluntary all-black schools. From this student's perspective, however, if black students did not attend racially mixed schools, white teachers such as herself would never unlearn their fear of blacks. As a result, the cause of racial progress would not be served. An African-American student pointed out that she did not want her children in schools where white teachers had to unlearn their fear of blacks; she wanted them in schools where they did not risk facing hostile white teachers. Other black students added that they were not concerned with the needs of white teachers; they wanted to get black children in schools where their needs would be met. When one of the African-American students told the white woman, "I understand your concern, and, believe me, it's not that I discount it. But I have to put our children first," the white student objected, "If you don't have to listen to my needs, why should I listen to yours?" This is listening on the turn-taking model, according to which everyone is to be treated identically. In her own eyes, this white student's need for integration was no less important than black students' need for black teachers. But

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 90.

as she listened to the black and brown students in the class and continued to read about blacks' experience in integrated school settings, she changed her mind. "All I could see at first," she said later, "was what I needed and wanted. I really wasn't seeing what the black students were going through or that their children's need was greater than mine." [...] As she came to appreciate the differences in power and privilege at stake, she recognized and accepted the asymmetry organizing the discussion.<sup>35</sup>

While Thompson tells this story to illustrate her points about listening, I think it is also a good illustration of the two strands of the argument about counterpublics that I have been exploring here. Firstly, an educational counterpublic is not necessarily, analogously to Fraser's model, an existing group with what Martin refers to as "culturally situated educational values." The educational ideas that are articulated by such groups often emerge and develop out of an encounter with lived experience - in this case, the experience of deeply rooted and pervasive injustice. To the extent that a counter-narrative to the hegemonic narrative about the value of public schooling is being expressed here, it is not simply an invitation to think differently about what public education should look like, but to think of what it *does* look like, for different people positioned differently within a structurally unjust system, and thus, as part of this same expansion of discursive space, an invitation to think about how this system needs to change.

A Habermasian "moral point of view" generated from an ideal deliberative process on the question of whether public schooling in a pluralistic, multi-racial society should be as integrated as possible, would probably yield the view that it should be. Yet this example is not meant just as another illustration of the point made powerfully by Iris Marion Young and other theorists, that "normative reflection must begin from historically specific circumstances ...and reflecting from within a particular social context, good normative theorizing cannot avoid social and political description and explanation".<sup>36</sup>

I have used this example in order to illustrate my point that any truly public deliberation about educational values and goals is inevitably going to be shaped and informed by people's experience of education, and by the ways in which educational processes, institutions and encounters reinforce or reflect particular political values and systems. The

---

<sup>35</sup> Audrey Thompson, "Listening and its Asymmetries", *Curriculum Inquiry*, 33, no. 1 (2003),85.

<sup>36</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.

discursive space in which such deliberation takes place, therefore, can only be expanded by the kind of critical counter-narratives that challenge these underlying values. Yet in order to really listen to such counter-narratives, we need to recognise the contingency of our dominant ideas about education; both the system of state schooling, and the capitalist state that sustains it. The crucial further point here is that it is often within educational encounters and spaces that such critical reflection can take place, and that alternative ways of organizing our political life can be imagined, articulated and enacted.

The history of radical educational experiments is a rich source of accounts that illustrate the ways in which, not only were these experiments posing a radical challenge to dominant social and political values, but they were doing so in ways that were not necessarily planned or predicted by the teachers and students involved in them. The novelist and teacher George Dennison, for example, describes his attempts at setting up a free school as part of a challenge to the broad inequalities and injustices of contemporary American society: “against all that is shoddy and violent and treacherous and emotionally impoverished in American life, we might propose conventions which were rational and straightforward, rich both in feeling and thought and which treated individuals with a respect we do little more at present than proclaim from our public rostrums.”<sup>37</sup>

In reflecting on the impact of the school, Dennison noted that it “made a great difference in the lives of some few children” but also commented how the parents, through their collective efforts to support the school, developed “new relations” and “to some small extent, turned the neighbourhood in the direction of community.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Davina Cooper, in her discussion of Summerhill, explores how the day-to-day experience of life in the school offers ways in which to enable “critical reversals in how social relations are imagined”,<sup>39</sup> beyond A.S. Neill’s explicit and intentional commitment to freedom and democracy.

The point is that in creating educational spaces that allow counterpublics to experiment and articulate their challenges to dominant political values and ideas, new forms of social interaction may emerge that themselves enable people to imagine new political structures and

---

<sup>37</sup> George Dennison, (1969) *The Lives of Children; The Story of the First Street School* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias; The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 184.

to think differently about what these values mean. This is a dynamic, organic and open-ended process and as such cannot be articulated in advance or framed in terms of a demand for a particular form of educational provision or content, other than the vague demand for a space in which to do things differently.

### **Education, imagination, and expanding our discursive space**

One insight to emerge from the above exploration of the idea of an educational counterpublic is that, contrary to the emphasis in Fraser's and Knight Abowitz's discussions, such counterpublics do not necessarily represent marginalized groups. As Asen points out, "emergent collectives are not necessarily composed of persons excluded from wider public spheres."<sup>40</sup> What I am suggesting is that it is in educational spaces that such emergent collectives can form, develop and articulate challenges to dominant understandings of political and social reality in a way that expands our discursive space.

Their ability to do so depends on the potential of students and teachers in educational encounters not just to represent, listen to and constructively engage with the perspectives of marginalized groups and the challenges they present to social and political institutions (as in Thompson's account, above), but on the ability to create and imagine possibilities that may not have existed in the minds of either subordinate or dominant groups.

It is here that Dewey's idea that "to form itself, the public has to break existing political forms" seems particularly pertinent. Education in the form of state schooling is, in nearly every contemporary society, a political form so basic that it cannot but dominate the terms of any public debate on education. Yet the existing political forms in question are not just the institutional structure of state schooling itself, but the assumptions about the kind of society we live in and the relationship between education and society. These forms and their underlying values - e.g. the value of individual competition; the correlation between educational attainment and positions in an unequally structured labour market - are so ingrained in the educational structures and discourse of most modern liberal states that they constitute the unexamined background assumptions to any discussion of educational policy and practice, unless they are explicitly challenged. It is here that educational counterpublics, in the sense I have been describing them, are so vital. For such a challenge can and must

---

<sup>40</sup> Asen, "Seeking the 'Counter' in Counterpublics", 439.

come not just from outside the dominant institutional structure of state schooling, from marginalized groups, but from within, and not just by coherently aligned and identified collectives expressing already existing cultural identities, but by individuals, including individuals from possibly privileged groups, who, acting together in educational encounters in the process of forging different identities and collective understandings, can posit imaginative and emancipatory ways of acting on and in the world.

Martin mentions in passing that “The presumptive worth of formal schooling is not a shared value.”<sup>41</sup> In his example of the Innu parents, this may be connected to their view that their cultural traditions are being undermined and threatened by the requirement that they send their children to school. However the imaginative exercise of questioning the institution of state schooling and its underlying values can be important not just because it encourages us to acknowledge the demands for recognition and inclusion of marginalized groups for whom this institution may be damaging, but because it opens up possibilities for imagining what a very different political reality would look like, enabling us to articulate more clearly what we think is wrong with our own political reality, and to see this reality as malleable and subject to change through collective action, rather than as fixed and given. The problem, as I see it, is not that the presumptive worth of formal schooling is not a shared value, but that in the dominant forms of public discourse on education - in policy debates, in the popular press, and in most educational research and theory - the presumptive worth of formal schooling *is* a shared value. Yet it is precisely the presumptive worth of formal schooling and the way it has shaped so many people's understandings of what counts as a justifiable educational aim that may be obscuring valuable ways of thinking about our political and social reality, what is wrong with it, and how it can be changed.

I offer, in what follows, a brief description of some ways in which educational experiments and encounters can help to create and enact just such imaginative alternatives, and how they can, not necessarily from the point of view of marginalized groups or pre-existing cultural identities, give rise to counterpublics that expand our discursive space.

The history of radical and libertarian education is full of examples of educational experiments that sought, through their pedagogical practice, ethos, organizational structures and physical environment, to challenge prevailing assumptions about the organization of social and political life. As Emily Charkin has described in her historical account of the Peckham

---

<sup>41</sup> Martin, *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World*, 62.

Health Centre, set up in London in 1926 as an experiment in creating a self-governing community involving educational, health and cultural activities, this kind of radical challenge can be embodied in simple things like the architecture of the educational space, and the character of adult-child relationships within the space:

The Centre challenges the prevailing ‘pessimistic value systems’, rooted in a dissatisfaction with ourselves, which represent children as victims in need of protection or ‘demons’ in need of control. The Centre offers instead, a view that children, parents and communities (including working class) are robust, responsible and capable of change. This is a path characterised by ‘hope and optimism’ instead of ‘anxiety, even despair’. The Centre also offers a challenge to our ‘forms of life’ through its ‘seemingly ordinary events and situations’: that up to 200 children were free to move around a building without rules, that a telephone could ring in a school classroom, that a school child could freely interact with a non-teaching adult, that an individual parent could be trusted with school funds to implement a curriculum idea, that a three-year-old could decide when she was ready to climb the bars in the gym and be allowed to ‘practise carefully getting to the top, without interference’, that a parent could take her child out of school to go swimming; that adults and children could enjoy observing each other learn. These ‘ordinary events’ have become extraordinary in the context of a compulsory school system and culture in which such actions have become stigmatised, criminalised and ultimately almost unimaginable. The Centre offers a path on which these ‘events’ could be again ‘ordinary’. <sup>42</sup>(Charkin, 2012).

Charkin's own experiments in developing an alternative to mainstream schooling, inspired by the ideas of radical and libertarian educators, have led to her setting up a woodland “school of self-reliance” where children learn through making, building, growing their own food and by being exposed to an adult work environment. (see <http://www.wildernesswood.org/about/>)

But it is not, of course, only outside the state schooling system that such educational counterpublics can flourish, as well documented in Michael Fielding and Peter Moss’s work on radical state education.<sup>43</sup> Many of the schools and educational experiments described by Fielding and Moss and other scholars<sup>44</sup>, whether historical examples like St George in the

---

<sup>42</sup> Emily Charkin, "The Path Not Taken': Self-Government, Community and the 'Freedom' School at the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950)", *Mother Earth*, Spring 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School; A Democratic Alternative* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> See for example David Gribble, *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1998); Robert Powell, *The Danish Free School Tradition: A Lesson in Democracy* (Kelsow: Curlew Press, 2001); John Shotton, *No Master High or Low: Libertarian Education and Schooling in Britain 1890-1990* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1994).

East, or contemporary examples such as the Danish free schools, exemplify, through their everyday practices, structures and ethos, what Fielding and Moss term a “positional restlessness”<sup>45</sup> ; they go on to develop this ideas as involving

a libertarian and egalitarian insistence on the openness of opportunity, on the need to unsettle patterns and dispositions of presumption, and the need to open up much wider and more generous vistas of possibility for all members of a school community. Such a school will pursue a range of organisational articulations of participatory democracy at the heart of which lies an insistence on a permanent and proper provisionality. At both adult and student levels, this will include a permanent unease with hierarchy and a strong desire to create transparent structures that encourage ways of working that transcend boundaries and invite new combinations and possibilities.<sup>46</sup>

In other work, Michael Fielding has discussed how pioneers of radical state educational such as Alex Bloom sought to nurture and enact, through their construction of the school environment, curriculum and pedagogy, the moral values of community, fraternity and collaboration, as a way of opposing the increasing pervasiveness of competition and individualism in social and political life. Fielding<sup>47</sup> describes Bloom's approach as follows:

To get the child to appreciate these two duties (to himself and to his community) objective rewards and punishments are false stimuli, for, unless the right thing is done for the right reason one lives unethically. Similarly, objective competition is wrong; it is not only unethical but it tends to destroy a communal spirit. (ibid) [...] Bloom argues not only that there is a fundamental contradiction between ‘competing *against* and co-operating *with*’ (Bloom, 1949, p. 171), but that a communally oriented school does not need the artificial stimulus of ‘carrots and goads’. In such a school the children will come to realize the self that is theirs and respect the self that is their neighbour’s....

Finally, many teachers, both in schools and in informal educational spaces, working within the broad tradition of critical pedagogy, can also be seen as both constituting and forging significant counterpublics. A contemporary example of such practice is the growing field of Hip Hop pedagogy, which has emerged out of the attempt to experiment with “how Hip Hop can be mobilized in schools to empower youth and facilitate students’ development into

---

<sup>45</sup> Fielding and Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Fielding, "Alex Bloom, Pioneer o Radical State Education", *Forum*, 47, nos 2&3, (2005), 122-123.

socially and politically active citizens.”<sup>48</sup> The Hip Hop pedagogy movement is a clear example of the ways in which educational ideas both grow out of and challenge a particular social and political reality, and its counterpublic nature perhaps cuts across the two different readings of Fraser’s account discussed above; in one sense, it represents a demand to recognize and value the cultural practices of marginalized groups, and constitutes in itself “a site of resistance to oppressive power relationships”; yet at the same time, it is self-consciously expanding the discursive space of educational ideas in its ongoing and dynamic endeavours, through educational practice, “to define, curate, and use artefacts, language styles, kinship norms, schooling methods, epistemologies of authenticity, and aesthetic practices to remix generational narratives about ideology, identity, race, class, and gender.”<sup>49</sup>

The significance of such educational counterpublics is rooted in an understanding of education as consisting in far more than the transmission of knowledge and skills, and in an understanding of social and political life in which, as Susan Babbitt puts it, “systems of meaning - the concepts and terms in which information and events are understood, and questions are formulated - preclude the understanding, even the imaginability, of certain important ethical and political possibilities.”<sup>50</sup>

If education is an important factor in both individual and social flourishing, then this imaginative, possibly radical, encounter with ideas and narratives that present alternatives to those that are dominant at any given time is a vital element of educational processes. For, as Babbitt says, “one cannot identify something as wrong unless one possesses some sort of notion of what is right, at least vaguely. This suggests that making the right sorts of connections presupposes at least some suggestion, even if not an absolute, complete vision, of what a more adequate alternative identity, and sometimes an alternative community, would be like.”<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Steven Netcoh, “Droppin’ Knowledge on Race: Hip-Hop, White Adolescents, and Anti-Racism Education”, *Radical Teacher*, 97 (2013), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Bettina L. Love, “What is Hip -Hop-Based Education Doing in Nice Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?”, *Urban Education*, 50, no. 1 (2015), 111.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

Associating the idea of a counterpublic with questions of identity as a pre-existing and coherent category and assuming that these counterpublics have educational values which can and should be part of a process of public deliberation towards a consensus on educational aims, overlooks the point that identities and values are not necessarily stable or coherent, and that it is often through educational encounters that they are forged, developed, and revised. The critical, counterpublic engagement with existing reality is a crucial component of such encounters, reflecting a dynamic interaction between individual consciousness, social change and collective action; for, as Babbitt says, "people often choose to act in ways that are radically self-transformative - to engage in radical politics or alternative lifestyles - when they discover that their *society* is deeply skewed."<sup>52</sup>

Recent work by political theorists has developed the idea of the politics of the imagination.<sup>53</sup> These theorists, while noting the proliferation of media images, virtual and real, that is such a central feature of modern life, argue that "in the world of global governance, politics seems to have become simple administration within a general neoliberal consensus and with very little variation in the political options actually available. Not much space is left for imagination understood as the radical capacity to envisage things differently and construct alternative political projects".<sup>54</sup>

If we understand politics as, in Pitkin's phrase, "the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future, to whatever extent this is within their power,"<sup>55</sup> then the political significance of educational counterpublics is evident. For politics, as Bottici says, "depends on imagination because it depends on the possibility to imagine commonalities and thus on the possibility to free oneself of one's own particularities by imagining what we might have in common with others."<sup>56</sup> So while Martin's account is

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand, eds, *The Politics of Imagination* (Oxford: Birkbeck Law Press, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Hannah Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", *Political Theory*, 9, no. 3 (1981), 343.

<sup>56</sup> Chiara Bottici, "From Imagination to the Imaginary and Beyond; Towards a Theory of Imaginal Politics", in Bottici and Challand, eds. *The Politics of Imagination*, 30.

based on the assumption of an intrinsic connection between moral value and educational value,<sup>57</sup> my discussion has explored the further point that there is also an intrinsic connection between educational value and political value. This is not just to make the fairly obvious point that educational norms are structured by their political context, but to draw attention to the fact that in a political context where alternatives to the liberal capitalist state are not part of the discourse, and where accordingly all educational alternatives under consideration are assumed to fall within the same broad political framework, narratives which challenge this very framework get “heard” as different demands for educational provision, rather than as discursive imaginings of different political realities. Enabling such educational alternatives to flourish is important precisely because in the absence of truly *counterpublics*, both in education and in other areas of our social life, people’s ability to imagine different political realities will be severely constricted, and public discourse impoverished as a result.

## **Conclusion**

While there is a lot to admire in the attempt to formulate a rigorous procedural account of a public project of articulating and justifying the norms and criteria of education, there is a danger, I think, that in our enthusiasm for the promise that such an account holds out - the promise that we will arrive, finally, at a consensus on these norms and criteria - we will forget that one of the valuable things that education can do is to open up and explore new possibilities for living and acting in the world; possibilities that some participants in and architects of this account may not have even imagined.

As McMahon notes, the main significance of Habermas’s theory “is that it emphasizes, in a way that other theories do not, the need to consult those who will be affected before making a moral judgment”.<sup>58</sup> While I am not questioning the moral and philosophical value of this insight, I am questioning the suggestion that, when it come to thinking about education, this implies that we identify groups who will be affected, articulate an account of their interests,

---

<sup>57</sup> Martin, *Education in a Post-Metaphysical World*, 146.

<sup>58</sup> McMahon McMahon, “Discourse and Morality”, 536.

and construct a normative conception of education that can accommodate this account. The problem is that “all those who may be affected” may not have access to imagined possibilities as they are not part of their repertoire.<sup>59</sup> Thus paying attention to the significance of the idea of counterpublics in an educational context means acknowledging that education can be a place where people come to develop an understanding of human interests, needs and desires - their own and others’ - and to imagine the kinds of social and political realities in which such interests can be realized. This is not something that can be worked out in advance of educational encounters in real political environments, but something that emerges from these encounters themselves.

Nancy Fraser, in problematizing the Habermasian conception of the public sphere as a political space where people can deliberate together to promote the common good, argues that “in general, there is no way to know in advance whether the outcome of a deliberative process will be the discovery of a common good in which conflicts of interest evaporate as merely apparent or, rather, the discovery that conflicts of interest are real and the common good is chimerical. But if the existence of a common good cannot be presumed in advance, then there is no warrant for putting any strictures on what sort of topics, interests and views are admissible in deliberation.”<sup>60</sup>

Acknowledging Fraser’s point means that we need to be open to educational experiments that challenge existing social and political assumptions, and that open up possibilities for imagining new and better arrangements, while realizing that the full contours of these cannot be determined or worked out in advance.

Counterpublics, as Fraser and others have compellingly argued, play a vital role in the political life of liberal democracies, by expanding our discursive space as part of our ongoing endeavour to create a more just society. If we are committed to such a process, then in thinking and deliberating about the role of education in our society we need, I suggest, to pay attention not just to questions of what education *is* or what it *should* be, but to questions of what it *can* be. Surely allowing for the formation, development, imagining and nurturing of such counterpublics is one of the important roles that educators can play; our educational institutions, spaces, and encounters then, although they may and should be many other things,

---

<sup>59</sup> See Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams*.

<sup>60</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”, 72,

should also be spaces in which this can go on; spaces in which educators and students together can expand our discursive space through "opening up spaces where people can try to bring into being a common world."<sup>61</sup> (Greene, 1995, p. 68).

### **Acknowledgements**

With thanks to Emily Charkin, Darren Chetty, Michael Fielding, and all the other tireless and energetic creators, explorers and defenders of educational counterpublics, without whom my own discursive space would be far narrower. I would also like to thank Chris Higgins, and two anonymous reviewers whose comments helped me to improve an earlier version of this paper.

---

<sup>61</sup> Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 68.