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Radicalizing Democratic Education: Unity and Dissent in Wartime

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NOTE: At the time of the publication, author Sigal R. Ben-Porath was affiliated with Princeton University. Currently (December 2006), she is a faculty member at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

In the summer of 2002, Israeli students took their final exams toward a high-school diploma. At seventeen or eighteen, just before gaining their voting rights and beginning their military service, the civic studies exam confronted them with the question: "explain why conscientious objection is subversive." With the stroke of a pen, decades of democratic deliberation on the balance between conscience and compliance, between majority rule and minority dissent, were eradicated. The students were presented with the conclusion, veiling a demand to condemn soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories. At a culminating point of their civic education, they were expected to explain why opposing the decisions of a democratic government, in the context of war, is treacherous.

Comments

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Radicalizing Democratic Education: Unity and Dissent in Wartime

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In the summer of 2002, Israeli students took their final exams toward a high-school diploma. At seventeen or eighteen, just before gaining their voting rights and beginning their military service, the civic studies exam confronted them with the question: “explain why conscientious objection is subversive.” With the stroke of a pen, decades of democratic deliberation on the balance between conscience and compliance, between majority rule and minority dissent, were eradicated. The students were presented with the conclusion, veiling a demand to condemn soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories. At a culminating point of their civic education, they were expected to explain why opposing the decisions of a democratic government, in the context of war, is treacherous.

This essay explores the normative role of civic education in responding to war, and in preparing society for the possibility of peace. It describes changes in the conceptualization of citizenship and in the manifestations of democracy in times of conflict. During wartime, democratic societies tend to transform their notion of citizenship to a militaristic one that is termed here “belligerent citizenship.” This notion of citizenship reflects the militaristic inclinations of society at war, and is made to support the public endurance in wartime. However, it also hinders tolerance, marginalizes and silences various individuals and groups, and impedes the consideration of alternative political futures.

I examine the role of public education in response to these social challenges. Based on Amy Gutmann’s democratic education theory, I maintain that the foremost role of public education is to foster basic democratic principles (such as equal opportunity and liberty). In wartime, the education system has to fulfill this role through *opposing* the mainstream conception of citizenship. To achieve that, public education has to focus on the aims suggested by the democratic theory of education — civic equality, exposure to diversity and tolerance — but it has to employ radical ways of interpreting and realizing these aims.

BELLIGERENT CITIZENSHIP

When a democracy enters a period of war, the basic assumptions upon which its social order is constructed are distorted. Civic freedoms, long held as guaranteed, are suddenly limited. Political alliances shift. One of the most significant changes for the purpose of public civic education is the shift from a liberal democratic conception of citizenship to a belligerent citizenship. This conceptualization of citizenship emerges as a response to perceived threats to individuals’ lives and national security. It is distinctly characterized by three key features: emphasis on citizens’ contribution to the country rather than on voluntary participation; support for social unity and patriotism over diversity; and consequently, the discouragement of deliberation.¹

The focus of civic participation during periods of conflict or security threats shifts from the voluntary to the mandatory. The measure of civic participation is no longer civic engagement, but the readiness to contribute to the war and the survival effort, and possibly to risk one's life for the sake of the country.² In a country like Israel where military service is compulsory, volunteering for combat service is considered the utmost civic virtue.³

A second distinctive feature of belligerent citizenship is an overpowering form of patriotic unity. A sense of solidarity, unity and a common cause are regarded by political psychologists as part of the required attitudes for enduring an intractable conflict. "The purpose of beliefs of unity is to provide a sense that all members of the society support the goals of the conflict and their leaders. They act to strengthen the solidarity and stability... a lack of unity, on the other hand, creates polarization and internal tensions that hamper the struggle with the enemy."⁴

The third distinct characteristic of citizenship in wartime is the way in which deliberation is perceived. Deliberation is far less encouraged in a state of war than in other times, or than what democratic models aspire for. Deliberation and disagreement are widely regarded as threats to the security effort, and the more the security threat becomes real and pressing, the narrower are the limits of the acceptable in public discussions. In situations of a protracted conflict, the public agenda tends to be focused around security issues, and a vast range of opinions is deemed unreasonable or irrelevant. Hence there are very few subjects that are perceived as worthy of public discussion, and very few perspectives that are regarded as adequate.

Although the concept of belligerent citizenship is based on the Israeli experience, there is strong preliminary evidence that it accords with the contemporary American circumstances as well.⁵ In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the social intolerance toward American Muslims grew significantly. One study concluded that after the attacks, Americans were "rallying around each other, concerned and even distrustful of some groups of foreigners [mainly Muslim and Arab Americans]. This is a kind of patriotism of mutual support."⁶ In addition the suppression of most deviating opinions is clearly seen in the American public sphere after September 11.⁷ The support for the president surged,⁸ and various venues of public debate grew reluctant to expressing criticism for the administration's decisions.⁹ The new or renewed sense of patriotism, solidarity, and unity, which some cherish as a positive "change of heart," can also account for a diminished support for free speech, for the reluctance to condemn the loss of civil liberties, and for the low-key public deliberation over the aims and means of the war waged on terror.¹⁰

Some evidence to valuing patriotic unity over free speech could be traced in the academic world. In January 2003, the University of California at Berkeley initially refused to allow a fundraising appeal for the Emma Goldman Papers Project, because the appeal quoted Goldman on the suppression of free speech and her opposition to war (writing during WW I, before she was deported to Russia).¹¹

Belligerent citizenship is advantageous for a society in times of war, for it helps the citizens endure the hard times and respond to them constructively. The belief in

unity induces a sense of common fate, belonging, and closeness. The external threats create a feeling of “we are all in it together,” “united we stand” or in the Israeli version, “we are all Jews.” However, it comes at a high cost. First, this unity is thin, elusive, and exclusionary, and therefore cultivates intolerance toward various subgroups. It alienates members of groups that are not properly represented in the public political discourse. This cost is borne mainly by minorities, who are excluded from the national solidarity or refuse to participate in its rites of patriotism. It is also borne by democracy itself. Second, this type of social unity and solidarity comes at the cost of political stagnation — an inability to envision and support change in the political circumstances. This stagnation is partly a result of a narrowed public sphere, and a public agenda that is so rigorously devoted to security issues that it tends to neglect or postpone most all social matters; and partly it is a consequence of the suppression of dissenting perspectives.

Consider the Israeli case as an illustration of these drawbacks. Taking a second look at the Israeli version of unity, we are not really “all Jews.” Some (over eighteen percent) are Muslim and Christian Palestinians; others are of a variety of denominations and nationalities. Not all Israeli citizens share the burdens of military service; hence not all have a chance to be considered good citizens. Israeli Belligerent Citizenship marginalizes groups that are exempt from military service — such as most Palestinian citizens, women, and disabled youth. Conscientious objectors are widely considered to be outcasts.

Moreover, the thin veil of unity, which obscures social divisions among the Israeli Jewish public, makes it difficult to create a meaningful public space. Members of various groups find that the cultural and social issues relevant to them are not reflected in the public sphere, because it is mainly devoted to security matters. Dissimilarities between groups that could be valuable and fruitful are minimized or ignored, and social problems that should have been publicly addressed are put off to “better days.”

The sense of national unity and solidarity stand all of these exclusions, and maintains such a strong place in the public *ethos* and debate that it can effectively curtail the claims of excluded groups. The concept of unity has a very simple control mechanism over the public debate, expressed by Arato in a highly critical article of the Bush administration after September 11: “if he wins this fight, we win. If he loses it, we lose.”¹²

How does the education system respond to these aspects of belligerent citizenship? The common response in the Israeli education system is to reflect uncritically the alleged national solidarity, and to teach the belligerent form of citizenship through the history and civic studies curricula, the celebration of holidays, and many other methods. Many, though not all, of the responses in the American public sphere and public education system point to the same direction.¹³ The espousal of belligerent citizenship by the public schooling system is perilous, for it impedes democratic justice, as well as replicating the circumstances of conflict. Viewed against the background of a decline in civic engagement since the previous decade, it generates concerns regarding the stability of American democracy. The next section is focused

on alternative ways in which the public education system should address the social circumstances of war.

RADICALIZING DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Educational theory should focus its attention on the tendency of the public education system to reflect and replicate the social responses to war, and mainly belligerent citizenship. Two challenging consequences of this tendency are intolerance, and the lack of vision regarding society's future. I suggest that the proper response of the public education system to the social circumstances of wartime should not be designed to accommodate but rather to oppose the mainstream notion of belligerent citizenship.

Many authors agree that a main justification of publicly funded education is the ability of such system to cultivate attitudes and skills necessary for the preservation of democracy.¹⁴ Since the circumstances of national conflict, along with their social consequences, imperil democracy in many ways, it is public educators' role to encourage democracy in the face of these threats. How should this challenge be met? My answer will be based on the principles of democratic education, modified by radical perspectives on education as a subversive action.

Let me begin by considering the aims of democratic education as portrayed in Amy Gutmann's influential theory. The primary aim of public education in a democracy, according to Gutmann, is to educate children for free and equal citizenship. This aim is to be realized through deliberation on the contents of public education, limited by democratic values. Democratic education is committed to "principles that, in the face of our social disagreement, help us judge (a) who should have authority to make decisions about education, and (b) what the moral boundaries of that authority are."¹⁵ The moral boundaries that Gutmann sets throughout her work are the boundaries of basic democratic values, particularly civic equality. The social context in which Gutmann contemplates her ideas is one of "social disagreement." The contemporary literature on civic education is largely concerned with the search for ways to accommodate, foster and limit diversity in a social reality of pluralism. Gutmann asks: "How can civic education in a liberal democracy give social diversity its due?"¹⁶ She maintains that "Schooling that is publicly mandated... may legitimately pursue civic purposes, which include... tolerance and mutual respect."¹⁷ Democratic education is therefore committed to positively respond to circumstances of diversity in a democratic society.

What are the relations between democratic education and patriotism? Patriotism, Gutmann reminds us, "is a sentiment rather than a moral perspective."¹⁸ To properly respond to this sentiment in the context of education, theorists should not (and usually do not) defend it in its basic expression of "my country, right or wrong." This would create a risk of uncritical acceptance of wrongful actions by the state. "A democratic education opposes this kind of patriotism when it encourages students to think about their collective lives in morally principled terms,"¹⁹ and when "its curriculum encourages students to think critically, in moral terms."²⁰ It is clear, therefore, that for Gutmann a democratic education is not dependant entirely on social consensus. Rather it is derived from democratic principles and commitments,

which provide the justification, the basis, and the moral limits for educational practices. Patriotism as an educational aim cannot evade these basic moral boundaries, and at its best it should offer ways of interpreting and manifesting them.²¹ When democracy is widely endorsed in society, the teaching of patriotism can easily be achieved in compliance with democratic principles.²² But in wartime the emerging forms of oppressive patriotism threaten to *substitute* basic democratic principles as guidelines for civic education.

Is this necessarily a negative possibility? What if belligerent patriotic unity is what most parents want for their children, and the majority, or the mainstream of society expects the education system to cultivate this notion of patriotism? Here too the theory of democratic education reminds us that the expectation of parents and communities cannot replace the public education system's commitment to basic democratic principles. Uncritical patriotic education stands the risk of promoting "parochialism and injustice."²³

In her response to multicultural critiques of democratic education, Gutmann supports a politics of recognition that is "based on respect for individuals and their equal rights as citizens," as well as curricular recognition of cultures, and tolerance of diverse perspectives on moral and religious issues.²⁴ This normative description is embedded in social circumstances in which the public agenda is vast enough to accommodate a variety of issues, therefore creating the need to educate citizens to tolerate differing standpoints. Similarly, Macedo maintains that support for tolerance, which he describes as a basic civic value, can and should be achieved through exposure to diversity, even at the cost of having to impose such exposure on opponents of "bedrock political values."²⁵ Gutmann emphasizes that "democratic education grants citizens discretion over how to interpret the demand of civic education," but for her, too, this discretion cannot supersede the basic principles of democracy. When parents oppose to teaching their children a democratic, civic curricula (as in the *Mozert* case), they "do not have a general right to override otherwise legitimate democratic decisions concerning the schooling of their children."²⁶ It is therefore the school's commitment to democracy that takes precedence over any demand made by specific parents or groups — and, I would add, even by the social majority or mainstream — regarding the civic education of children.

In the social circumstances of wartime, the public education system may need to impose exposure to diversity, along with the cultivation of other basic democratic values, not only on small radical groups but on a growing part of mainstream society as well. The justifications Macedo and Gutmann offer for imposing "bedrock political values" or "basic democratic principles" on marginal groups in a democratic society apply also to circumstances when these values are questioned or rejected by the mainstream. Based on the claim that democratic principles should apply to all citizens, and therefore can justifiably be imposed on those who would prefer not to expose their children to them, we can begin to construct a normative educational response to belligerent citizenship.

The public education system should be committed to the principles of democracy, not to majority rule or parental authority; therefore it should continue to

exercise its commitment to democracy through denying belligerent citizenship and opposing its undemocratic messages. Essentially, the type of unity that is associated with belligerent citizenship is inimical to democratic deliberation, to critical thought, and to the possibility of tolerance and inclusion. A thin but resilient blanket of solidarity is suppressing the social reality of diversity and pluralism, addressed — among others — in Gutmann's writings. The public agenda is narrowed down to questions of national security, and certain religious and cultural perspectives are deemed threats to national security. What follows is an exclusion of various groups, and political stagnation. A radical interpretation of the aims of democratic education can potentially offer the most relevant response to these problems. In other words, the focus of liberal theorists on civic equality, educational diversity and tolerance is crucial in the context of war. Nonetheless, the presiding interpretation of these aims may be too weak when the social circumstances are not hospitable for democracy. This is where the radicalized notion of democracy advocated by radical democrats such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren should be employed.²⁷ To keep its commitment to democratic principles, public education should foster critical notions of civic education and encourage educators to assume the role of public intellectuals committed to democratic principles rather than to majority perspectives.

Why, then, should we not — when confronted with circumstances of war — abandon liberal democratic perspectives on education in favor of radical democratic perspectives? Democratic educational theories do not lose their relevance in times of war. To the contrary — their emphasis on civic equality, recognition of differences, and “reciprocity beyond borders” gain more relevance when democracy is threatened.²⁸ In addition, the tendency of radical theories to lump together criticism against hyper-individualism, capitalism and globalization, regardless of its theoretical value, is less effective a tool for opposing militaristic and undemocratic social attitudes. It is the educational *tools* that radical democratic theorists offer that can strengthen the pursuit of democratic justice as Gutmann and other liberal democratic theorists define it. In other words, public educators should in times of war continue to endorse *principles* of democratic education, but they must use radical *tools* to implement them. Such coalition of perspectives could enable the emergence of new forms of diversity, giving voice to subgroups oppressed by the social circumstances of war, and allow students, teachers and the wider public to envision a different political future.

How should the aims of democratic education be interpreted in the context of war? How is the education system to foster and promote democratic values, attitudes and skills in the face not of diversity or even intolerance, but of paralyzing, patriotic unity of opinion, which is widely regarded as essential to national survival? It is hard to assume that recognition and tolerance will be as readily cultivated in the classroom. They still remain desirable, even urgently needed attitudes; but to promote them, along with other democratic values and attitudes, educators may need to act in ways more radical than deliberating and teaching an inclusive curriculum. As Giroux reminds us, it is the role of educators to:

provide spaces of resistance within the public schools...while simultaneously providing the knowledge and skills that enlarge their sense of the social and their possibilities as viable agents capable of expanding and deepening democratic public life.²⁹

To fulfill the liberal demand for civic equality, educators should create spaces of resistance in public schools. Actively supporting the expression of a variety of standpoints, rather than plainly responding to their implied existence in the public and educational arenas, would be an effective practice of manifesting the students' civic equality. It would demonstrate a resistance to the exclusion of individuals and groups by the security-dominated, solidarity-oriented public sphere.

The radicalization of the liberal demand for civic equality and tolerance requires educators to oppose the social tendency to narrow the borders of the public agenda. Part of what enables the perpetuation of belligerent unity is the reduction of the public agenda to questions of security, which are expected to be solved by military and administrative professionals. Here too the role of teachers — as educators and as public intellectuals — is to resist the attenuation of the public sphere and the public agenda by creating a zone of vivid democratic life within the classroom. The discussion of issues other than those relevant to security is emancipatory, for it reclaims politics as a sphere of “political judgments and value choices.”³⁰ It makes room for a multiplicity of perspectives on a variety of questions, and gives voice to those whose perspectives and interests are being silenced by the overpowering claims of national security. In such times there is great urgency “to inculcate the values necessary for the perpetuation of democratic institutions.”³¹ But this task has to be performed in *opposition* to the social tide. Gutmann claims that “Teaching tolerance, mutual respect and deliberation...supports the widest range of social diversity that is consistent with the ongoing pursuit of liberal democratic justice.”³² When justice is narrowly conceived of in conflictual terms, when society tends to accept polarized notions of humanity and inhumanity as justifications for war, and “axis of evil” is contrasted with “freedom lovers,” then the pursuit of democratic justice is no longer a peaceful mission.

The threat that society and public education face in times of war is not solely that of intolerance, but also the lack of vision of the future. “Politics devoid of vision,” Giroux warns us, “degenerates into... a repressive notion of patriotism.” Therefore, “democracy has to be struggled over,” and this struggle should become the central role of the public education system in times of war.³³ Educators should structure their classes as forums for public deliberation, encouraging both a diversity of issues and a diversity of voices, to resist the tyranny of the monolithic public sphere. To envision a different future, different questions must be asked, and differing answers should be tolerated to the largest extent possible. Envisioning a future of peace entails questioning the basic assumptions of war as well as the social acceptance of these assumptions. It entails the development of critical thought that is limited only by the most broad and most basic democratic political values, rather than by the contingencies of public opinion.

For response see essay by Voke

1. See Gad Barzilai, *Democracy in Time of War: Conflict and Consensus in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1992) (in Hebrew) and Baruch Kimmerling, *The Interrupted System: Israeli Civilians in War and Routine Times* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1993).

2. See a variety of examples to this claim in Yael Tamir, "Pro Patria Mori: Death and the State," in *The Morality of Nationalism*, ed. R. McKim and J. McMahan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
3. For the Israeli context, see, for example, Yitzhak Galnur, *The Beginning of Israeli Democracy* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 309 ff. (in Hebrew); Orit Ichilov, "Patterns of Functioning of a Citizen in a Democracy," in *Education for Citizenship in a Democracy*, ed. Orit Ichilov, (Tel Aviv: Masada and Tel Aviv University, 1993) (in Hebrew). This change in the construction of civic participation is less significant to the theory of civic education, mainly because education is a non-voluntary system, and therefore it will mostly remain in the background for the rest of the discussion.
4. Daniel Bar-Tal, *Obstacles on the Path toward Peace* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1996), 24 (in Hebrew).
5. See M.J. Dubnick, "Postscripts for a 'State of War': Public Administration and Civil Liberties after September 11," *Public Administration Review* 62 (September 2002): 86-91.
6. Michael Traugott and others, "How Americans Responded: A Study of Public Reactions to 9/11/01," *Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 3 (2002): 511-6, at 516.
7. For an account on how the security discourse in America undermines basic civil liberties, see Bruce Shapiro, "All in the Name of Security," *The Nation* (October 21, 2001): 20-21.
8. Reaching a Gallup poll ninety percent approval on September 21-22.
9. See Preliminary findings in Brian J. Gaines, "Where's the Rally?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 3 (September 2002): 531-6. See also R.K. Bird and E.B. Brandt, "Academic Freedom and 9/11: How The War On Terrorism Threatens Free Speech On Campus," *Communication Law and Policy* 7, no. 4, (October 2002): 431-59.
10. See Theda Skocpol, "Will 9/11 and the War on Terror Revitalize American Civic Democracy?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 3 (September 2002): 537-40; Stanley B. Greenberg "'We' — Not 'Me': Public Opinion and the Return of the Government," *The American Prospect* December 17, 2001 25-27.
11. Dean Murphy, "Old Words on War Stirring A New Dispute," *New York Times*, 14 January 2003, A1.
12. Andrew Arato, "Minima Politica After September 11," *Constellations* 9, no. 1 (2002): 47.
13. See Henry A. Giroux, "Democracy, Freedom, and Justice after September 11th: Rethinking the Role of Educators and the Politics of Schooling," *The Teachers College Record* 104, no. 6 (2002): 1138-62.
14. See for example Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton University Press 1999); Stephen Macedo, "Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?" *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 468-96; William Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Iris Marion Young, "Mothers, Citizenship and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 535-56.
15. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 11.
16. Amy Gutmann, "Civic Education and Social Diversity," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 557-79, at 557.
17. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 292.
18. *Ibid.*, 312.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Amy Gutmann, "Civic Minimalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Patriotism: Where does Democratic Education Stand in Relation to Each?" in *Moral and Political Education, Nomos XLIII*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Yael Tamir (New York: New York University Press 2002): 23-57, 49.
21. See for example K. Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press 1996), 22.
22. As can be seen in the careful analysis by Robert K. Fullinwider, "Patriotic History," in *Public Education in a Multicultural Society*, ed. Robert K. Fullinwider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 203-30.
23. Amy Gutmann, "Challenges of Multiculturalism in Democratic Education," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996).
24. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 306.

25. Macedo, "Liberal Civic Education," 485.
26. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 294.
27. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992); and Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (London: Routledge, 1993).
28. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 309.
29. Giroux, "Democracy, Freedom, and Justice after September 11th," 1155.
30. Cornelius Castoridas, "Institution and Autonomy," in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne (New York, Routledge: 1996), 8.
31. Michael W. McConnell, "Education Disestablishment: Why Democratic Values are Ill-Served by Democratic Control of School," in *Moral and Political Education*, 87-146, at 87.
32. Gutmann, "Civic Education and Social Diversity," 579.
33. Giroux, "Democracy, Freedom, and Justice after September 11th," 1152.