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**EDUCATION FOR PROBLEMATIZATION:  
A DEMOCRATIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SCHOOL**

A Dissertation in

Philosophy

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is an inquiry into the contemporary theory of democratic education, exploring in particular the demands that a vital pluralist politics places upon public educational institutions and their affiliated pedagogical practices. In the past two decades, political theorists have articulated a variety of new conceptions of civic education, including prominent communitarian and deliberative democratic variants, that emphasize the need to halt the increasing dominance of economic rationality within the school and to reorganize the institution to reinvigorate more robustly ethical forms of socialization. Although many educational critics concur that the narrowly economic goals of contemporary education are detrimental to the stability of society and the psychic health of the individual, serious theoretical debate has arisen around the question of whether it is the cosmopolitan normative principles of deliberative democracy or the culturally grounded ethical schemas of traditional communities that ought to take the lead in reconstructing the institution of the school.

I argue in this dissertation that both the deliberative and communitarian trends within civic educational theory alike have insufficiently considered the interdependence of robust ethical culture and a resilient democratic public; the mechanisms of democratic debate, I contend, ought to be understood pragmatically as tools for resolving trans-communal problems, while cultural frameworks of value ought to be understood as sensitive normative instruments for detecting and publicizing emergent threats to social life. Relying upon a pragmatic conception of democratic citizenship adapted from the work of John Dewey, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas, I argue that the work of democratic education accordingly must be reconstructed around the activity of communicative problematization. If democratic politics is to continue to be responsive to the needs of the public, young citizens must be

habituated and encouraged to engage in cooperative practices of social criticism, drawing on the normative motivations of their ethical lifeworld to criticize and publicize the problems encountered in their individual social experience.

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## Methodological Introduction

### Critique and Reconstruction

The school is such an entrenched and familiar institution of contemporary life that we modern Americans are sometimes incapable of recognizing just what a staggeringly large and idiosyncratic project our society has undertaken. The school occurs to many of us, when we think of it at all, as simply being a fact of life, just in the same way that being born under a system of law and punishment is, or perhaps even in the same way that being born under the guardianship of a parent is. Going to school, paying for schools through taxes, sending one's children to school—these are simply the natural rhythms of modern society that give a common shape to our individual lives. Judging from the depictions offered in the broadcast media, as well as from the structure of educational debate among elected officials, it might seem to a disinterested observer that the only problem surrounding education today is the problem of not having *enough* schooling, for the school primarily seems to enter public consciousness insofar as we are anxious that our schools are falling behind the achievement standards of other nations or that we are too lax in giving our children generous amounts of time off. Apparently no sustained reflection upon the question of *why* more time in school is needed or *why* more rigorous standards are good is needed because the existence of the school is simply a natural fact whose legitimacy we accept and whose mission we must obviously endorse; schooling is just what we do.

If we try to step back from this blinding familiarity with our educational system, however, and examine afresh the sheer enormity of the undertaking, the relative recency of its origins, as well as the complex mobilization of public resources and of governmental power that are required to make the

continued existence of the school possible, I believe that we are compelled to soberly ask ourselves just precisely what it is that we are doing and why. The modern deployment of the school is not a project that arose ‘naturally’ within the course of social evolution; it is a project that required a concerted campaign to initiate and that requires a continual mobilization of population and resources to sustain. At the beginning of the 2012 school year, it was projected that 49.8 million American children and teens would enroll in K-12 public schools, and an additional 5.3 million would enter into private institutions in lieu of the public option. At the earliest end of the age spectrum, 1.3 million children would also be enrolled in public “pre-kindergarten” programs, the newest frontier for expanding the number of hours that the average child will spend under the supervision of pedagogical experts over the course of her life.<sup>1</sup> All together, these enrollment figures represent 56.4 million children, or about one-sixth of the total US population and almost all of the population between the ages of 5 and 18, signing up for regular school attendance in 2012—something which nearly none of them would have participated in had they been born just 200 years earlier.<sup>2</sup> From a monetary perspective, the extraordinary ubiquity of school enrollment translates into a sum of \$571 billion funneled from public funds to support public education, or more than \$11,000 per student.<sup>3</sup> By comparison, the Pentagon projected a slightly higher budget of \$613.9 billion for all American defense spending—an astounding number that is nevertheless easily overshadowed by educational expenses if we consider that the reported educational expenditure of \$571 billion includes only public K-12 schools and excludes private schools and institutions of higher education.<sup>4</sup> In short, if we are to judge purely by expense and by enrollment, schooling—by which I mean the enlistment of nearly every young person into a prolonged, institutionalized educational program—is perhaps the most massive governmental project that the American state has ever undertaken.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education, “Fast Facts.”

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau, “State and County QuickFacts.”

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Education, “Fast Facts.”

<sup>4</sup> US Department of Defense, “DOD Releases Fiscal 2013 Budget Proposal.”

The recognition that the school depends upon such a massive mobilization of resources and population, I believe, ought to give us pause, for it reveals that the school is quite transparently not a natural fact of social life. It is an institution that we choose from moment to moment to support and maintain, and accordingly it is an institution that we ought to be able to justify with positive reasons rather than passively accept. The need to account for this massive social expenditure—the need to explain both the *why* and the *how* of the schooling—is made even more exigent, however, if we try to step outside our own comfortable familiarity with the institution and attend more carefully to the experiences of those students, families, and communities whose interactions with the school have been characterized by friction and tension rather than implicit understanding and agreement. The limited audience for an academic inquiry such as this most likely contains individuals who have enjoyed relatively smooth and successful interactions with the school, but it is essential to recognize that the familiarity of this self-selecting group with the customs and procedures of schooling cannot be extrapolated to the population at large. The “we” who maintain a comparatively easy and comfortable relationship with the institution of the school is surrounded at the margins by a heterogeneous group whose experience has been marked not by implicit understanding, but by perpetual conflict, mistrust, and misunderstanding.

In my own personal history with the institutions of schooling, it is only in retrospect that I can recognize that I was surrounded throughout my years in public education by a diversity of experiences that belied my own naturalized trust in the school: from the children of recent immigrants, whose parents had no prior experience with the school through which they could understand and support the challenges faced by their children, to the economically disadvantaged student for whom time in the school represented direct losses in wages, to the culturally particular communities of Sikhs, Hindus, Christian fundamentalists, and Muslims whose ethical values often placed them at odds with the supposedly neutral norms and rituals of the secular school. I was surrounded for at least twelve years

by student peers whose strained relationships with the school distinctly differed from my own, but I was incapable of perceiving the problematic nature of their experience because I was blinded by my naturalized familiarity. Indeed, it was not until I first attempted to take on the role of a teacher and by necessity was forced to attend to the needs of all students in the classroom that I recognized, through contrast, the fact that my own comfort inside the walls of the school was largely a product of the arbitrary circumstances of my own social location—circumstances like my culture, race, economic status, and familial history. The procedures and objectives of institutional education seemed transparently unproblematic to me as a student, for the school fit into the rhythms of my social life as the primary agency of economic preparation and intellectual cultivation; but this natural legitimacy was nevertheless always under contestation by the diverse experiences of those students whose social lives outside of the school followed a pattern incompatible with their lives inside the school.

The school is undeniably an ensconced, established fact of contemporary social experience, but I believe we must recognize furthermore that the school is essentially a problematic fact. Even though the school has become naturalized in such a way that for many members of the population it is no longer subject to any serious crisis of legitimacy, it is nevertheless surrounded by a panoply of individuals and communities for whom the massive mobilization of social resources behind the institutionalization of education fosters as many problems as it does advantages. The largest governmental project undertaken by American society—a project through which we attempt to shape our own habits, dispositions, values, skills, and future trajectory—is a project whose simplest goals remain insufficiently clear to those who partake in it and whose most basic procedures remain under perpetual contestation. The fundamentally problematic, contested nature of the school compels us to ask what precisely it is that we are doing by institutionalizing education, why it is that we have undertaken this project, and whether the school might be in need of significant recalibration to better meet the needs and desires of the plural communities subject to its services. The problematic fact of

the school demands a twofold process of *critique* and *reconstruction*.

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Classical educational philosophy characteristically attempts to guide educational processes by articulating an abstract schedule of developmental ideals that are grounded in some theoretical understanding of the true nature of the human subject or of human society. Thus we find Socrates, in Plato's *Republic*, praising the virtues of geometry and music in education and encouraging separate educational institutions for a city's rulers and the *hoi polloi*, all based upon a foundational theory of the virtuous rule of reason within the soul and the city. Similarly, in Rousseau's *Émile*, a theory of the natural and uncorrupted man serves as the foundation for Émile's tutor to invent all manner of supposedly autonomy-inducing pedagogical devices. Nor is educational foundationalism merely an historical philosophical curiosity—a relic of our philosophical past—for the same general strategy of working from theoretical ideals to justify a particular form of educational practice can of course be utilized to reform existing institutions today. There is no shortage of Rawlsian theorists, for example, who are hard at work deciphering the implications of Rawls' two principles of liberal justice for the just distribution and structure of educational opportunities, and indeed such inquiries might constitute a useful form of educational critique insofar as they hold present practices up to the light of often illuminating normative ideals.

Despite its historical ubiquity, however, educational foundationalism possesses distinct limitations which stem directly from its reliance upon abstractly derived norms of education developed in isolation from the lived experience of the school. The origins of the foundationalist's normative principles, isolated from the existent fact of the school, foster a certain blindness to the unanticipated problems that can arise in ongoing educational experience.<sup>5</sup> While the theory of distributive justice, for example, might fruitfully guide a reform of contemporary educational funding and access, leveling the playing

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<sup>5</sup> For a more general discussion of this problem in political thought, cf. Dewey, "Freedom and Culture," 137–156.

field for all individuals to have equal opportunities at developing their talents, this foundational approach lacks the appropriate set of lenses to perceive the potential harm that distributive programs might unintentionally perpetrate against culturally autonomous communities—a problem which has been expansively elaborated upon by communitarian critics.<sup>6</sup> Even more dangerously, a foundationalist approach to normative critique is also blind to the unjustified, contestable assumptions that are often embedded in the foundational principles themselves—assumptions about the essentially independent nature of the subject, or about the universal reign of economic rationality within the human will, for example. These occlusions in the foundations can be brought to light through the difficult critical work of those individuals whose life patterns are constrained or harmed by the foundationalist reforms grounded upon unexamined assumptions, but foundationalism itself will often vigorously resist such a critique of its own basic assumptions.

Rather than following the well-worn track of educational foundationalism, therefore, I propose to strike out on an alternate trail in this dissertation and subject the school to an immanent, anti-foundational critique of its present tensions, crises, and persistent problems. The school has had its share of foundational theorists who have deployed their theoretically discerned principles to generate an incredible array of idealized institutional structures and projects of reform, and each of these projects has left legible traces which can be deciphered in the present experience of the school. An anti-foundationalist critical strategy, however, reverses the order of explanation and begins instead with the present tangle of practices, programs, purposes, rationalities, and ideals, and attempts to untangle the knot in order to decipher which normative principles or forms of educational rationality lie at the root of which problematic elements of educational experience today. Only once we have understood the origins and the anatomy of the school as we experience it today can we hope to remediate some of the tensions and dissatisfactions that it inevitably produces.

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition.”

To be sure, I do not claim that an anti-foundational critique of the school is an entirely novel or unprecedented approach to educational theory. Indeed, the Frankfurt School critical theorists have inspired a wealth of immanently critical accounts of the school, many of which are directly responsible for the insights that drive my own analysis in this dissertation.<sup>7</sup> The neo-Marxist critiques of the school that have dominated the critical landscape since the 1960s, however, often place overwhelming emphasis upon the economic determinants of the school to the point of dismissing other cultural, moral, or political forces as purely superstructural. My own analysis confirms the central importance of economic forces in setting the agenda of contemporary education, but I believe that a more nuanced immanent critique cannot allow the driving beat of the economic story to deafen us to the subtle play of cultural forces—religion, morality, cultural tradition—and political forces—democracy, liberal rights, coalition politics—that have contributed principles and practices to our educational experience that are irreducible to purely determined economic imperatives. These cultural and political forces of social life, after all, are often the interpretive frames that provide historical agents with the understanding and the normative motivations that guide their interventions in the educational realm, and an immanent critique that collapses these dimensions of experience back onto the determining plane of economic reality denies the efficacy of individual actors’ own thoughts and desires in shaping the course of social development.

The critical strategy that I adopt in this dissertation, therefore, attempts to interpret the school not as an epiphenomenal product of immanent economic forces, nor as a relatively better or worse implementation of an a priori normative ideal; instead, I interpret the school as an always-evolving institutional response to the emergent problems that social actors perceive in their experience. As Michel Foucault observes,

To one single set of difficulties, several responses can be made. And most of the time different

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<sup>7</sup> Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*; Young, “Habermas and Education”; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*.

responses actually are proposed...But the work of a history of thought [I would say *critique*—JBS] would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of problematization that has made them possible.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the problematic conditions that have catalyzed the evolution of the school allows us to sort out and analyze more carefully the often contradictory and non-cohesive practices, programs, and rationalities that constitute the institution of the school as it appears to us today. The school is an historical conglomerate of an institution, born out of numerous generations of conflict between reformist camps and *ad hoc* responses to emergent problems, and we inevitably misrecognize the functions and effects of these sedimented institutional features if we approach the school with a pre-conceived notion of what moral or economic ends the school serves. By returning to the ‘conditions of problematization’ that have motivated the construction of the school, and by paying heed to the voices of educational dissenters who have perpetually re-problematized the school in response to their lived experience of the institution, I believe we can gain a much clearer understanding of what divergent social purposes have been invested in the institution of the school as well as of what tensions and contradictions are responsible for the dissatisfactions felt today.<sup>9</sup>

Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation are dedicated to the task of interpreting the school as an historically layered response to social problems, unearthing both the conditions of problematization that have motivated communal and governmental actors to sponsor the school and the continuing series of conflicts that re-problematize the school and give it its present shape. Although in the colonial era, the school—then a relatively rare institution—existed as a means of consolidating communal culture in the face of hostile social and environmental conditions, the century between 1750 and 1850 witnessed an eruption of trans-communal problems that forced diverse communities to reconsider the potential of the school as a nationalizing institution. The central debates of this era gave birth to a

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 118.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Vol. 2*.



profound three-way conflict between the old conception of the school as an agency of communal consolidation, on the one hand, and two divergent models of deploying the school for nationalizing purposes, on the other. The present shape of the institution, I argue, reflects the slow effacement of the communal deployment under the pressure of trans-communal problematization and the eventual triumph of a predominantly economic response to those problems over alternative political responses.

The work of anti-foundational, problem-based critique thus provides us with a clear diagram of the often-conflicting social purposes that form the institution of the school, and it also gives us insight into the points of tension where reform of the school might be catalyzed today. A purely critical account, however, cannot propose strategies for negotiating the school's present problems or for improving the institution to better serve the needs of the present. To engage in this positive moment of theoretical creativity, we must move beyond the retrospective labors of a critique which seeks to understand the present conglomeration of forces as a response to past conditions of problematization, and instead we must engage in the prospective work of suggesting novel responses to present problems. The anti-foundational spirit of my critical analysis of course disallows any return to a priori theoretical norms to support an entirely new utopian model of the school, but the attunement to the multivalent problems reported in diverse individuals' experiences fostered through the process of immanent, problem-based critique nevertheless gives unambiguous direction to the work of reconstructing the school. The positive task of educational reconstruction listens for the tensions prevalent within the contemporary experience of the school and attempts to recalibrate the institution to better respond to the needs and problems of the present moment.

Like the essentially descriptive enterprise of problem-based critique, the prescriptive undertaking of reconstruction refuses to dictate the purpose of the school through reference to a foundational philosophical understanding of the norms of psychological or sociological development. Instead, reconstruction takes the present fact of the school as its foundation; it is the historically and culturally

contingent experience of the school by its clients that provides the impetus and the orientation for suggesting alterations to its structure. The institution of the school, after all, is the intelligent response by human actors to the problematic conditions of their experience, and if the remedies and palliatives offered by the school have proven to produce their own noxious effects in experience, there would seem to be no other justifiable ground for reforming the institution than the problematizing claims made by those who must live through its highly ambivalent processes. As John Dewey writes,

No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few...The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses.<sup>10</sup>

The lived experience of those individuals persisting under the governmental structure of the school is the ultimate court of appeal for the success or failure of the institution, and following this Deweyan commitment, the reconstructive approach I follow in this dissertation listens to the diversity of needs, complaints, and goals voiced at the ground level of educational experience in order to find creative ways to recalibrate the institution to better respond to the exigencies of current social life.

The reconstructive approach is not blindly subservient to the unreflective whims of every passionate or vocal segment of the public, however. To the contrary, educational reconstruction entails a critical weighing of the competing claims put forth by different clients of the school, searching for common normative commitments and practical interests upon which a joint educational project can be organized while dismissing those suggestions for reform that would provoke as many new problems as they would resolve. The goal of reconstruction, to reiterate, is not to satisfy every momentary desire or complaint of the various parties to the educational undertaking but rather to intelligently restructure the conditions of experience so as to reduce the dysfunctions and dissatisfactions of the present and equip individuals to securely and creatively respond to the emergent conditions of their future.

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<sup>10</sup> Dewey, "The Public and Its Problems," 366.

The work of reconstruction occupies the bulk of this inquiry, and accordingly, beginning in the second chapter of this dissertation and extending to the end, I undertake a careful analysis of the educational claims and problems announced by communitarians, liberals, deliberative democrats, and a heterogeneous group of political radicals in order to articulate a set of democratic educational principles that can respond effectively to contemporary dissatisfactions and to clear room for maximal educational creativity. I argue that the dominance of an economic rationality within the walls of the school today interferes with a wide variety of developmental goals valued within the diverse constituencies of the public, sparking problems of anomie, competitiveness, cultural disintegration, and political apathy. Although numerous educational programs have been proposed as remedial mechanisms for resolving such problems, I contend that a democratic model of educational deployment provides the most inclusive and stable grounds for reconstructing the school to meet these dissatisfactions. In particular, I highlight the task of producing *problematizing* citizens as the unifying ground upon which the diversity of heterodox educational schemes can be coordinated and realized.

The civic practice of problematization is the critical activity through which individuals recognize a shortfall or tension between the norms of their lifeworld and the lived reality of their social experience and then proceed to investigate and publicize these observed problems to the broader body of the public. Insofar as the diverse individuals of a pluralist society confront an overlapping set of problems that they cannot resolve individually or within the cloistered corridors of cultural communities, to that extent they will rely upon the discursively connected network of fellow problematizing citizens to identify and cooperatively confront the shared challenges of the present. Coping with the fluctuating difficulties of life in socially complex, economically modernized, pluralist societies thus seems to require the development of a problematizing public in which all members are prepared to engage in two interrelated civic practices: first, an integrating recognition of the mutual problems that unite the socius, and second, an active attempt to investigate, advertise, and publicize emergent problems first

encountered within one's life experience. The norms that orient individual acts of problematization derive their motivating power in an individual's idiosyncratic lifeworld context, and to that extent the development of a problematizing public necessitates that individuals be educated within a non-neutral, ethically robust context that provides them with the normative energies to critically evaluate their social world. Nevertheless, the pragmatic interest in promoting the problematizing capacity of the public that all members of modern, complex societies possess indicates that there is an over-arching democratic purpose for contemporary educational institutions—a purpose that draws together all diverse communities behind a singular educational mission. Reproducing the ethos and skills of problematization is the reconstructed democratic focus of contemporary education.

The pressing political work of the democratic public to reproduce citizens capable of recognizing common problems, publicizing emergent problems as they arise, and engaging in a sustained discussion concerning the collective response to these problems is thus the unifying ground upon which the modern school can be reconstructed. Revising the administrative and pedagogical structure of the school to promote the democratic practice of communicative problematization is, on my account, not only an effective strategy for combating the problems of overweening economism in the school; it is also a reconstructed educational program that allows for communalists, liberals, and radicals all to creatively pursue their own specific educational pathways without hampering the capacity of the public to cope with emergent problems into the future. Education for democratic problematization, in other words, allows the school to respond to the diverse needs of its pluralist constituency without sacrificing the vital political resources of democratic action.

Through a theoretically modest strategy of educational critique and reconstruction, therefore, I believe I can at once clarify the central tensions that characterize the contemporary educational apparatus and offer an indication of the principles that ought to guide the resolution of those tensions. Following the history of social problems that have motivated the construction of the school, my inquiry

reveals the origins and the logic behind the achievement-oriented economic model of pedagogy and administration dominant today, and by critically evaluating and synthesizing urgent complaints against this economic deployment, I am able to sketch out a model of democratic education that pushes back the advances of the economic deployment and opens a passage way for the satisfaction of more diverse educational goals. An anti-foundational critique and reconstruction of education enables us to recalibrate the institution of the school to better meet the needs of the present through a program of democratic revitalization.

## Chapter 1

### Community, Polity, and Economy: Historic Social Purposes of American Schools

An unusual aspiration has captured the imagination of American educational reformers of late—an aspiration, paradoxically, to end the era of educational reform movements, to utilize the school as a tool of social policy no longer, and to rededicate the school to a constrained, purportedly traditional academic mission. Drawing previously divided parties together with its attractive simplicity, this anti-reformist program of reformation defines itself as a return to the common-sense work of education that has long overshadowed by illusory goals of social amelioration, and it offers a simple set of policy objectives designed to peel back the layers of distortion accumulated over the previous century. “Achievement,” “standards,” and “accountability” are the watchwords of the new educational orthodoxy, guiding remedial bureaucratic interventions intended to correct the excesses of progressivism, vocationalism, reconstructionism, Afrocentrism, feminism, multiculturalism, and other reformist programs.

In its simplest formulations, this critical “back to basics” movement within educational policy presents parents and educators with a stark choice: schools can either provide each and every child with the tools they need to maximize their potential, or they can sacrifice individual achievement, progress, and mobility in pursuit of the naively idealistic goals of social harmony and political transformation. A *Nation at Risk*, the influential Reagan-era report that brought the notion of educational crisis to modern public debate, laid out the basic narrative for this view of modern American educational crisis. Highlighting flagging measures of academic achievement, the report focused in on the supposed

distractions of curricula aimed at better socializing children, at making them culturally sensitive, at boosting community engagement, or at bolstering self-esteem, pinpointing these progressive educational purposes as the root causes of educational decline.<sup>11</sup> American schools, on this account, had lost sight of their initial commission, which was simply to provide all children with the intellectual skills needed to ascend to whatever social station their ambitions aspired to, and by placing social objectives over individual development, educators had blithely ignored their duty and underserved generations of children. As Diane Ravitch, a noted educational historian and one of the leading proponents of standards-centered reforms, argued, the only hope for redemption of the public schools lay in a return to “their anchor, their sense of mission, their intense moral commitment to the intellectual development of each child.”<sup>12</sup>

By firmly grounding the project of the school in a moral vision of intellectual autonomy and accomplishment, the back to basics movement strikes a chord of individualism that resonates strongly within the American political tradition, valorizing individual over society and achievement over entitlement. This politically attractive interpretation of the school’s founding purposes, however, presents an oversimplified interpretation of educational history, and it glosses over the dazzlingly complex welter of socially—not merely individually—oriented projects that gave birth to the institution of the school. From the first rudimentary public schools of Puritan Massachusetts, to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic schools of New York City, and even to the present day defense of religious educational independence, the school has been used by many throughout American history as a tool for communal

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<sup>11</sup> Ravitch, “Education and Democracy.”

<sup>12</sup> Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, 16. Much has been made since 2010 of Diane Ravitch’s ‘epiphany’ that an increased emphasis on high-stakes testing and school accountability are not the panaceas to all of the public schools’ problems. Ravitch’s ballyhooed ‘reversal,’ however, has not extended to include a reversal of her fundamental sense of what the basic aims of the school system are. Certainly, Ravitch has come to doubt the effectiveness of using high-stakes tests as a measure of overall school quality and the adequacy of market reforms to the task of turn failing schools around. In her newest book, however, she still pits “pedagogical fads, enthusiasm, and movements” against “the value of a rich, coherent school curriculum”—as if the academic curriculum had no pedagogical enthusiasms of its own. Cf. Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, 2.

consolidation and cultural reproduction. And since at least the time of the Revolution, many parents and community leaders have also promoted the school as an agency of democratic unification and political preparation, supporting the formation of public schools primarily for their civic potential. Neither of these historically prominent paradigms justifies the school through a singular moral obligation to individual intellectual cultivation, as those who promote the narrative of the hallowed moral commission would have it; to the contrary, the education of each individual's intellectual capacities is in each of these cases subordinated to broader social purposes of communal unity or political responsiveness. From this historical view, the achievement movement's call to "return" to the sacred mission of individual intellectual cultivation through the school seems disingenuous. There has never been a singular moral mission of the school upon which all—or even most—Americans could agree, much less has there been a consensus around the particular mission of individual academic cultivation.

When Ravitch talks of reverting back to the simple mission of individual academic preparation, therefore, or when *A Nation at Risk* encourages educators to ignore social reform and get "back to the basics," this misleading simplification covers over the diverse social functions—from cultural consolidation to democraticization—that the public has demanded schools perform in the past. What is more troubling, however, is the manner in which this simplified history also disguises the inescapably social impact of the individualist paradigm itself. After all, limiting the teacher's enterprise to individual academic preparation does not eliminate the social influence of the school; it only means that the society the school helps to create will be an increasingly individualistic one. By insisting that the school focus on an individual's academic potential rather than his cultural fluency, for example, today's standards reformers shut out the voices of minority communities whose beleaguered culture depends upon educational autonomy for its continued survival, and they arguably foment cultural disintegration; or again, by reducing the school's objectives to a narrow list of basic academic skills and standards, they



foreclose in-school possibilities for students to begin thinking critically and cooperatively about broader political problems. The individualist educational mission thus has a social impact that favors some forms of social development and disadvantages others, but rather than justifying these contentious effects, the back to basics movement uses its simplified historical narrative to shut arguments for alternative social development out of the educational conversation.

In this chapter, I intend to dip beneath the placid vision of the individualist paradigm that constitutes today's orthodoxy and reveal what I believe to be the diverse and conflicting social purposes that gave rise to the institution, as well as to call into question the benignity of the mission of individual capacitation. Through an episodic reading of American educational history, I will bring to light three fundamentally social deployments<sup>13</sup> of the school that have given rise to today's institution: first, a deployment of the school as a social technology for consolidating and reproducing a culturally unified community, which can be traced back at least to colonial Massachusetts; second, a later developing form of educational reason emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that centered on the construction of a democratic citizenry, particularly in response to new types of metropolitan social problems; and finally, a broadly economic conception of the school as a tool for managing the productivity of the national population, in which the notion of individual capacity building at last attains educational primacy. Each of these three educational deployments can still be seen in various aspects of today's schools, but it is my contention that the modern school system has been influenced most decisively by the economic rationality of increasing productivity—a rationality which emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which the standards movement wittingly or unwittingly continues to justify today.

Although contemporary reformers might attempt to bypass difficult debates over the school's social

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<sup>13</sup> I borrow this term from the work of Michel Foucault, who uses the French term *dispositif* ("apparatus" or "deployment" in English translation) to designate the ensemble of administrative practices, institutional designs, and rational discourses that organize and regulate a domain of human experience. For example, the "apparatus" or "deployment" of the prison, in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, is shown to organize a certain domain of illegal activities through a combination of architectural structures, disciplinary practices, and discourses of criminology. Cf. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

impact by declaring an end to the age of social reform through the school and by “returning” to a core academic mission, I believe that this policy movement fundamentally misunderstands its own historical roots and continuing social impact. As the following investigation will reveal, the restriction of the school’s activities to the work of intellectual capacity building has historically served as a highly effective tool for reconstructing society in an economic mould. Furthermore, this economization of education has typically occurred at the expense of all of the more directly cultural or political visions of social life, which have slowly been excluded from official educational policy. It is in the interest of returning the submerged and maligned voices of community and polity to contemporary educational debates that I turn back to the history of American education, recounting the role these inherently social purposes played in the construction of the school as well as the avenues by which they were eventually conquered by an individualizing economic rationality.

### **§1 Colonial Schools and the Consolidation of Community**

Education in early America was fundamentally a local enterprise, with wide variations in organization and content persisting not just between the colonies, but also between individual localities within any one colony. One of the few constants that stretched across the variegated educational landscape, however, was the near-universal insistence that particular communities be allowed to raise children according to the religious, moral, and cultural dictates that defined their union. Those groups that did join together to provide for the education of their youth almost always did so with an eye to preserving local mores and traditions, reinforcing communal religious authority, and managing potential sources of disobedience; the development of individual capacities was universally subordinated to this primary set of social goals.<sup>14</sup> Colonial educational institutions, when they existed at all, were unfailingly parochial and sectarian, and frequently served as a bulwark against the erosion of hierarchical and

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<sup>14</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 9.

authoritarian social arrangements.

Despite this apparently anti-democratic, illiberal history, the early development of educational laws and institutions in colonial New England still serves as a natural starting point for understanding the forces that have shaped the modern public school system, for it was in 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts that education began to be conceived of as a matter of social concern rather than merely parental authority. The colonial government of Massachusetts, after all, was the first in North America to make education compulsory for all children, dedicating public energies to the mental and moral improvement of the community's children. In 1642 an initial law mandating literacy instruction was passed that placed the burden of the effort entirely upon the parents, but a second law quickly followed in 1647 that compelled towns to provide for the construction of public schools, thus relieving parents of some of the burdens of the earlier regulation while making education a matter of public concern. By levying taxes for the construction of town grammar schools, the Massachusetts colonists became the first in the future United States to seek out a common, institutional solution to the rearing of children and collectively guarantee a minimum level of literacy for all members of the community, and this common dedication to the work of education would remain prominent in the colony throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> As the renewed Province Charter of 1692 explained, it behooved the townships of Massachusetts to invest in the capacities of their young inhabitants in order to ensure that they “do not live idly and misspend their time in loitering, but that they be brought up or employed in some honest calling, which may be profitable unto themselves and the publick.”<sup>16</sup>

Were these early legislative and institutional innovations, however, committed to the same “moral mission” of increasing individual opportunities that contemporary reformers place at the root of the American school system? What purposes organized this initial deployment of the school in the American context? In the hagiographic histories of American education popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts General Court, “Massachusetts General School Law.”

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Ensign, *Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor*, 22.

early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a powerful temptation to see in the legislation of the Massachusetts Puritans an exception to the insular educational attitudes of the other colonies and a prophetic forerunner to the modern American commitment to public education.<sup>17</sup> The historian Forest Chester Ensign, whose thoroughly researched history of early compulsory education laws remains an invaluable resource in many respects, wrote in 1921 of the Puritan leaders,

Their religion demanded that all be able to read, and, in order to insure to the children of every community the educational opportunities voluntarily provided by the most progressive, the famous compulsory school law of 1647 was enacted...<sup>18</sup>

The ascription of “progressive” motives to the Puritans, however, surely extends the limited liberality of their educational policies too far. For while the early Massachusetts laws undeniably did seek to compel all children, regardless of social status, to attain a certain rudimentary educational level, the schools were nevertheless not mechanisms of ensuring equal individual opportunities, as Ensign’s claim suggests. The initial deployment of the school in the American colonies was founded upon an undeniably communalist—not individualist—rationale.

The early legislative efforts of 1642 and 1647, as well as the successive revisions to these statutes over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were not primarily beneficent efforts to put each individual child on the road to personal success; they were tools for inculcating orthodox religious belief, guaranteeing doctrinal fidelity, and compelling social obedience from each member of the Puritan community. In fact, this religious-communal rationale for the provision of public education in Massachusetts is written directly into the 1647 schooling law itself, which begins:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the

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<sup>17</sup> For an insightful discussion of this ‘evangelical’ trend in early educational historiography, see Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*, 15–28.

<sup>18</sup> Ensign, *Compulsory School Attendance and Child Labor*, 23. Though Ensign’s work is an invaluable investigation into early compulsory education laws, it falls prey to the tendency common at the time to attribute a large measure of American educational success to the virtuous culture and character of New England without critically examining the parochialism and theocratic leanings of schools of the colonial period.

Scriptures, as in former times keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these later times by perswading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the Originall might be clouded by false glosses of Saint-seeming deceivers...it is therefore ordered by this Court and Authoritie thereof; That every Township in this Jurisdiction...shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read...<sup>19</sup>

As this biblically intoned preamble demonstrates quite clearly, the Puritan colonists were not primarily concerned that their children be given equal opportunities to develop their intellectual capacities, for the dire concern of spiritual and social dissolution hung ominously in their consciousness and overshadowed all other priorities. It was a fundamentally defensive concern with policing the conscience of the community and shoring up congregational obedience that motivated the initial development of the school in the colonies.

In order to better understand the religious-communal deployment of schools in colonial Massachusetts, therefore, we must first examine the peculiar social anxieties and motivations that characterized Puritan communities and prompted their overriding concern for consolidating their communities of faith. The Puritans, it should be remembered, did not set off for the New World in order to pursue better economic opportunities, as some early Virginia colonists did; they departed from England in the 1620s and '30s in order to practice their separatist religious faith without hindrance or persecution from hostile governments and neighbors. Late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe had witnessed a proliferation of heterodox religious sects and communities, not only due to the initial separation of Protestant groups from Rome, but also as a result of consequent splintering of dissident faiths into ever narrower sub-denominations.<sup>20</sup> Religious fragmentation catalyzed political tension in England in particular, where the pervasive doctrinal schisms of the age opened up widening gaps

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<sup>19</sup> Massachusetts General Court, "Massachusetts General School Law."

<sup>20</sup> The work of Christopher Hill remains a central scholarly source for interpreting the social impact of these religious schisms in England. Cf. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*.

between the monarch and his subjects. The English Puritans under Charles I found themselves repulsed to an ever-greater degree by the Catholic-tinted religious predilections of their monarch and his bishops, and in the 1620s and '30s non-conforming congregations faced a critical choice between abiding by the officially sanctioned ritual of the Church of England, or separating to establish their own independent presbyters. Not only were English Puritans alienated from the ecclesiastical authority of their country by doctrinal differences, but a widening cultural gap of personal mores and social customs also provoked a pronounced distaste for mingling with non-Puritan elements of English society. One early immigrant to New England complained of “the multitude of irreligious lascivious and popish affected persons” that plagued the old country, noting that only the creation of a new “commonwealth” of pure believers would permit the practice of the true faith to survive.<sup>21</sup> This social and political crisis in English Puritan congregations accordingly was the direct impetus for a “Great Migration” from England, with committed Puritan believers seeking new locales where they might collectively practice their faith without harassment from their political superiors or corrupting influences from their neighbors.<sup>22</sup>

From the earliest years of colonization, therefore, the settling of Massachusetts was not a mission designed to improve the material life or social standing of individual colonists; it was at its heart a religious-communal project designed to create the social conditions necessary for the proper attainment of spiritual salvation. The New World would provide the colonists a reprieve from the corrupting “lasciviousness” of their old English neighbors, as well as relieve them of the mounting political pressure towards doctrinal conformity. But wiping away the corruption of the old continent through emigration could not alone guarantee the success of the Puritan project, for the New World presented a novel set of obstacles to the blessed way of life. John Eliot, an early Puritan minister, explained that the colonists had given up their “native country, a settled habitation, dear friends, houses, lands and many worldly comforts, to go into a wilderness where nothing appeareth but hard labour, wants, and wilderness-

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *The Wonder-Working Providence of Zion's Saviour in New England*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, “Migrants and Motives: Religion and the Settlement of New England, 1630-1640.”

temptations...”<sup>23</sup> Chief among these “wilderness-temptations” were the customs and pagan rites of the natives, whom Eliot viewed as physical embodiments of the New World’s siren call to anarchy and idleness, but of course Eliot also had in mind the internal temptations of pride, selfishness, and heterodox belief. If the colonists succumbed to these savage temptations, either by neglecting their religious observances or by lapsing into a heathen idleness, the Puritans believed that not only would their colonial experiment fail, but this failure would further demonstrate the absence of God’s grace in their lives.

More so than in the Old World, therefore, the Massachusetts colonists would have to unite their personal and familial efforts to provide for material subsistence, communal defense, and spiritual solace. Puritan leader John Winthrop, while en route to the New World, foresaw the dangers a land yet unstructured by the bonds of church, state, and family presented to the colonists’ mission, and he warned his shipmates that to “avoid this shipwreck...we must be knit together, in this work, as one man.”<sup>24</sup> Winthrop offered his fellow migrants a new vision of community life as common membership in the “body of Christ,” and he laid out a triply bonded civic structure in which fidelity to a shared faith, mutual love between individuals, and acceptance of civic and ecclesiastical authorities would enable the colonists “to serve the Lord and work out [their] salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.”<sup>25</sup> Special measures would be necessary for the reinforcement of both spiritual and temporal authority, and to this end, Winthrop asserted, “the care of the public must overshadow all private respects.”<sup>26</sup> Heads of family who in England had enjoyed relative autonomy over the conduct of their households, Winthrop cautioned, must be prepared in their new venture to embrace a form of communal life that would enable collective institutions of social governance to engage in potentially

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<sup>23</sup> Eliot, “The Learned Conjectures of Reverend Mr. John Eliot Touching the Americans, of New and Notable Consideration,” 423.

<sup>24</sup> Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” 46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

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

invasive forms of surveillance and control, all in the name of communal salvation.

It was within this communally focused project of collective salvation, that the public school—a tax-supported institution of compulsory education—first appeared in America, and the Puritans’ deployment of educational laws and institutions in the 1640s is best interpreted as an early instantiation of Winthrop’s doctrine of public care. Although private families might wish to exempt their children from literacy requirements, to withhold their tax dollars from the education of other families’ children, or to teach heterodox doctrines within their household, the success of the communal project demanded cooperation and submission. Schools were thus designed to “knit together” communities of religious belief precisely along the triple bond sketched out by Winthrop: ensuring children were raised to display fidelity to Church doctrine, to afford mutual support between community members, and to obey the representatives of temporal authority. Unlike other Puritan legislative undertakings—legislation providing for the punishment of idlers, the execution of routinely disobedient children, or the regulation of contact between natives and settlers—Puritan educational practice sought to reinforce communal order *positively* through the cultivation of strong communal bonds and sound moral character, and the governmental technologies they developed to accomplish this aim would prove indispensable for the future development of the American public school, even long after the central religious purposes of these communities had withered away. Two general practices serve to illustrate the manner in which practices still associated with the school today were initially deployed within a system of communal consolidation: mandatory literacy education and the establishment of the common classroom.

In colonial Massachusetts, the extension of basic reading skills to all children—regardless of gender or economic status—was given the highest and the earliest priority. The colonists’ resolve to raise all children to be able to read is perhaps unsurprising in light of their Protestant faith; since the time of Luther, direct, individual access to the word of scripture had been a central concern of Protestant dissidents. In the Puritan worldview in particular, the individual’s relation to God could not be mediated



through a potentially corrupting ecclesiastical hierarchy; it could only be fostered through a direct, personal encounter with scripture. All children needed to be able to read the Bible as a means of personally securing their individual salvation, and universal literacy thus served as an indispensable mechanism for forging the first bond of communal life: all members of the community must be personally tied, both affectively and intellectually, to the truth of scripture.<sup>27</sup>

Personal salvation, however, was not the only end for which the colonists turned to the governmentally sponsored mechanism of universal literacy. In the 1642 educational legislation, for example, at least two other purposes for literacy requirements are offered, each mirroring the remaining two axes of Winthrop's model of community. While the 1642 law did insist that all children and dependent apprentices ought to be able to recite "some short, orthodox catechism" when called upon to do so by their parents or the Selectmen of the town, it also specified that they must be trained to read the "English tongue" first so that they might know the "Capital Lawes," and second so that they might work at some "honest, lawful calling."<sup>28</sup> Aside from its function as a vehicle of religious truth, therefore, literacy was additionally expected both to reinforce the legal authority of the government by facilitating communication between governors and the governed and also to underwrite the material stability and mutual aid of the colony by promoting industry and productivity. Literacy is a skill that makes individuals productive members of their temporal community; it is a mechanism for communication between political authorities and their subjects; and it is a vehicle of religious truth and personal salvation.

The entanglement of these three functions of literacy in colonial Massachusetts is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the actual texts the Puritans used to teach their children to read, and to a lesser extent to write. In the sparse eighty pages of *The New England Primer*, the schoolbook of choice that

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<sup>27</sup> For two overlapping discussions of the technology of literacy in Protestant movements, cf. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, 183; Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 213.

<sup>28</sup> Massachusetts General Court, "Massachusetts General School Law."

from the 1680s forward supplanted similar primers printed in England, no more than ten pages of the volume—the pages dedicated to numeracy—stand without some moral lesson emphasizing the duties of children to their parents, to their elders, to themselves, or to their God.<sup>29</sup> Sample entries in the *Primer* included the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, a selection of Biblical verses concerning the “Duty of Children Towards Their Parents,” and an exhortation written by the Protestant martyr John Rogers to his children warning them of the dangers of an impious life. Even the ABCs do not escape the fate of being marshaled into the inculcation of obedience and industry. In the “Alphabet of Lessons for Youth,” frequently assigned as a memorization task, children were reminded, “A Wise Son makes a glad Father, but a foolish Son is the heaviness of his Mother,” and “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a Child, but the rod of Correction shall drive it far from him.”<sup>30</sup> A second set of alphabetized and rhymed maxims reminds children that “The Idle Fool / Is whipt at School,” and “Thy Life to Mend / This Book Attend.”<sup>31</sup> The key virtues thus emphasized throughout the text might be grouped into a threefold set of obligations: obligations to God (piety, faith, etc.); obligations to one’s parents and elders (obedience, submission, etc.); and obligations to community (industry, reliability, etc.). Aristocrats in the old world might still have viewed literacy as a dangerous skill that threatened to dissolve traditional social relations, but in Massachusetts the colonists were determined to harness its power to foster a nested set of relationships—to family, community, and God—that taken together guaranteed the spiritual and material success of their collective undertaking.

The communally consolidating function of literacy education was further intimately connected to a second educational technology explored by Puritan leaders in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—the formation of common town schools across the colony. In the earliest years of the colony, the provision of literacy

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<sup>29</sup> Ford estimates that in its first 150 years in print in New England, the *Primer* sold an average of 20,000 copies annually—a 150-year total of three million copies sold. Ford, *The New England Primer: A History of Its Origin and Development with a Reprint of the Unique Copy of the Earliest Known Edition*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

had been left entirely within the realm of familial concern, as it had been in the Stuart England the Puritans had so recently fled.<sup>32</sup> Parents were expected to instruct their children in basic reading skills and thus enable them to encounter the Scriptures on their own terms, memorize their catechism, understand public announcements of the laws, and hopefully engage in profitable work for the economic wellbeing of the colony. Those parents incapable of providing such skills to their children were expected to send their charges off to informal “dame schools”—kitchen table instruction in reading offered by local women—or have their children removed from the household by town authorities. Already by the 1640s, however, various sources of uncertainty had begun to invade and undermine the predominantly informal and familial arrangements for literacy education that the Puritans had brought with them from England.<sup>33</sup> As Bernard Bailyn has argued in his influential interpretation of colonial educational history, the unexpected difficulties of preserving Puritan culture in the New World were most immediately and disconcertingly observed in the declining efficacy of the family as an institution of cultural transmission.<sup>34</sup> Family units living at the frontiers of the settled regions were disconnected from the supportive embrace of a religious community; the difficult and menial nature of New World labor occupied all of a family’s time; and frequent periods of starvation or poverty encouraged children to leave home and set up their own households at earlier and earlier ages. A growing number of children who, if they had been raised in England by their pious parents, would have learned to read as a matter of course were being deprived of this knowledge in the New World. Even worse from the Puritan point of view was the worrisome trend of non-Puritan immigrants arriving from England, Scotland, and Wales, taking up residence alongside and within dissident communities and threatening the remaining ties of religious and cultural unity that persisted in the townships.<sup>35</sup> As John Winthrop had feared, the fluid social relations of the New World were undermining the Puritan resolve

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<sup>32</sup> Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*, 173–175.

<sup>33</sup> Monaghan, “Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England,” 39.

<sup>34</sup> Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society*, 23–25.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 31..

to promote industry, piety, and obedience in their communities.

Taking inspiration from the Elizabethan Poor Laws, which addressed the problem of idleness and beggary in England through a combination of charity, punishment, and confinement, the Massachusetts colonists sought to create a similar institutional solution to the unique difficulties that threatened their communal order. As in the English Poor Laws, Massachusetts lawmakers authorized the Selectmen of the townships to remove children from any household where they were not being trained to participate in some productive labor and punishments were devised to put beggars and the idle poor to work.<sup>36</sup> The wider scope of the colonists' problems, however, and the precipitous degradation of traditional family structure prompted them to sponsor an additional institutional solution: the establishment of schools in every sizeable settlement, supported by public funds, and open to most children of the community for a minimal fee.<sup>37</sup>

To be sure, charity schools and organized systems of apprenticeship were arising across England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as well; but the Massachusetts experiment dreamed of an extension of the institution of the school on a new scale and ordained it with an expanded purpose. The school was not just to be a vocational complement to an already functioning familial system of instruction, nor was it merely a convenient tool for occupying the time of orphaned children. The Massachusetts schools were also dedicated to consolidating the new, triply bonded form of community of common belief first envisioned by Winthrop. As Bailyn argues, "The Puritans quite deliberately transferred the maimed functions of the family to formal instructional institutions, and in so doing not only endowed schools with a new importance but expanded their purpose beyond pragmatic vocationalism toward vaguer but more basic cultural goals."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," 32.

<sup>37</sup> There is some debate concerning to what degree girls were allowed to enter these new town schools, a debate that lends itself to no easy resolution due to the inconsistencies in local practice across time and between communities. See Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England."

<sup>38</sup> Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society*, 27.

A brief examination of teaching regulations propounded in 1654 for Dorchester, Massachusetts once again give us insight into the strategies by which the school was deployed to reinforce communal solidarity.<sup>39</sup> Firstly, the schoolmaster was expected to instruct his students in the religious beliefs and practices of the community, beginning every day with prayer and utilizing scripture in the conduct of every lesson. Through such means, young scholars could be unified through their individual apprehension of singular religious truth; scripture unified the community through common belief. The school was not just a space for religious instruction, however, for the schoolmaster was additionally expected to inculcate “dutiful behavior towards all, especially their superiors,” and to apply proportional punishments every “second day of the week” to discourage infractions of duty and civility. These two words, “duty” and “civility,” which occur throughout the Dorchester regulations, point directly to the primary interpersonal bonds tying the Puritan community together—bonds of duty between governors and the governed, on the one hand, and bonds of civility and mutual support between community members as equals, on the other. By collecting together the children of the devout along with the sons and daughters of lapsed Puritan families and non-Puritan and subjecting them to the moral formation of a single master, the town schools of colonial Massachusetts sought to reunite their fragmenting population, knitting them together through bonds of religious faith, communal cohesion, and civil obedience.

In drawing this study of colonial educational technologies to a close, we should note that if this Puritan deployment of the school as a tool of religious-communal subject-formation appears odd from a twenty-first century perspective, it is largely because the goals of education are today closely bound up with conceptions of individual liberty and autonomy almost completely absent from early America. For Puritan Massachusetts, an individual’s independence from civil and religious authority would not have signaled authentic freedom, but a dangerous exposure to the threats of untamed desire and the

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<sup>39</sup> Dorchester regulations taken from excerpted material found in Hunt and Mullins, *Moral Education in America’s Schools: The Continuing Challenge*, 4.

untrammelled wilderness. Puritan leader John Winthrop, in his 1645 speech before the General Court of Massachusetts, articulated a conception of “civil liberty” that neatly sums up the communal rationale of the early colonial schools. In contrast to the “natural liberty” to do whatever one pleases, Winthrop praises civil liberty as a form of mutual subjection to a common authority.

[Civil] liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. The woman’s own choice makes such a man her husband; yet, being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free but in her subjection to her husband’s authority. Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ...<sup>40</sup>

Civil liberty—the temporal counterpart to eternal religious salvation—depended upon the formation of the individual subject into an obedient, productive, and faithful member of the stable communal order. The common school emerged within Puritan society as an essential governmental tool for fostering the individual’s acceptance of this order and for incorporating him into this religiously organized community—thus guaranteeing both his liberty and his salvation at once.

## **§2 Parochialism and Pluralism**

The experience of colonial Massachusetts may have been unique in its early advancement of the ideal of a publicly financed system of universal education, but by the onset of the 18<sup>th</sup> century other colonies were beginning to take note of the Massachusetts experiment. Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century all of New England, with the notable exception of proudly secular Rhode Island, mandated the establishment of town schools, while legislators in Virginia and New York enacted legislation that threatened parents with the removal of their children if they failed to provide them with some basic

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<sup>40</sup> Winthrop, “Governor Winthrop’s Speech.”

form of education.<sup>41</sup> Most of these early legislative projects in support of educational expansion lacked effective mechanisms of enforcement, and as a result few lasting public institutions were established. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Massachusetts had established a model set of practices for how education and the school might function within the context of the small, relatively homogeneous settlements that characterized the early colonies. The school was called upon to serve as an institution of communal consolidation, bringing the population together to recognize certain established forms of social authority, to encourage mutual civility and assistance, and to shore up orthodox religious belief in the face of corrupting or degenerative influences.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, changing demographic and political trends in the colonies provoked a widespread set of conflicts around the Massachusetts model, catalyzing a simultaneous clamor for an expansion of the state's efforts to promote education as well as a critical rejection of the legitimacy of such a project. At the heart of this growing dispute was the simple fact that the population of colonial America was becoming increasingly diverse, with immigrants from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds establishing new settlements into the Appalachian interior. Many of the new groups that began to populate the American countryside were religious dissidents who had fled Europe seeking the same religious independence valued by the early Puritans, and it is no surprise that upon their arrival, these new colonists likewise viewed the formation of culturally specific educational customs as an essential social right. Education was for them, as it had been for the Puritans, a primary tool in the struggle to consolidate their community and maintain their culture in the face of the disintegrating influences of migration, a foreign milieu, and the adversities of a frontier environment.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, at least, the perspective of the new arrivals melded well with the existing goals of American educational arrangements. Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, new, inter-communal tensions and trans-

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<sup>41</sup> Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," 38–39; Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*, 256.

communal social problems began to arise that called into question the wisdom of allowing such a diverse collection of cultural groups to develop into miniature polities, each asserting a parochial identity distinct from its surroundings, and colonial elites began to dream of a new type of trans-communal polity that could confront these problems. Anglo-American luminaries like Benjamin Franklin and William Smith of Philadelphia were increasingly concerned with what they perceived to be a shared set of social needs emerging across the rigorously defended boundaries of particular cultural communities: a need for protection against the French and their Indian allies; a need for a pan-Protestant resolve to shun the missionaries of the Catholic Church; and a need to minister to the predictable degenerative effects that frontier conditions had upon culture, character, and intellect.<sup>43</sup> In thought, at least, if not yet in practice, a new conception of a polity united by common concerns—the *res publica*—was emerging that extended beyond the purely parochial concerns of self-sufficient congregations, and the school was once again deployed to bring this new form of social cooperation into being.

From the very beginning, however, proponents of the emergent notion of a trans-communal polity struggled to define precisely how diverse cultural groups could negotiate their differences and coordinate their energies to confront shared problems. The self-imposed political and cultural isolation of small, religiously unified social units across the expanding interior of the colonies, after all, disallowed any cooperative, dynamic attempt to cope with perceived common problems across boundaries of faith and community. The Anglo-American elites, for their part, were quick to resort to cultural chauvinism when they encountered resistance from separatist communities in the Appalachian interior: Franklin and Smith criticized what they saw as the cultural inferiority and unfriendly isolation of some immigrant groups, citing the slavish ‘popery’ of Catholic immigrants or the stubborn ‘boorishness’ of Germans as

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<sup>43</sup> Frasca, “‘To Rescue the Germans Out of Sauer’s Hands’: Benjamin Franklin’s German-Language Printing Partnerships.”



the primary obstacles to the common project of self-defense and self-governance.<sup>44</sup> Behind these knee-jerk reactions of chauvinism and isolationism, however, lay a genuine problem for the organization of the growing colonies: what type of collectivity or social cooperation would enable the diverse groups of American society to cope with those problems that extended beyond the borders of their self-reproducing cultural communities? The old model of communal consolidation first articulated by Winthrop allowed for cooperation and mutual assistance between individuals and families sharing a common religious faith and affective communal attachments, but new social problems required cooperation between individuals who lacked these strong communal bonds.

The public battle over the charity school movement in Pennsylvania, one of Ben Franklin's schemes for breaking communal control over basic schooling among the Pennsylvania Germans, provides a vivid illustration of how elites in 18<sup>th</sup> century America struggled, at first unsuccessfully, to articulate a new model of social cooperation. On the one hand, the German-speaking communities demanded the right to use educational institutions to bolster the cultural and religious unity of their autonomous communities, while on the other hand, Franklin and other Philadelphia luminaries believed the schools ought to be utilized to foster a new form of trans-communal republican unity. Franklin's inability to separate dispositions of democratic political cooperation from the strong communal bonds of religion ultimately hindered the success of his proto-republican project, and the episode thus illustrates quite clearly the difficult imperative of balancing cultural and political objectives in the deployment of the school.

By the 1750s, more than fifty percent of the inhabitants of the colony of Pennsylvania were either German-speaking immigrants or were of recent German ancestry. Living in scattered settlements stretching into the then-frontier territories of central and western Pennsylvania, many of these German Protestants, who belonged to separatist sects like the Mennonites or the Brethren as well as the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

mainline Lutheran and Reformed churches, had fled their homeland in Switzerland and the Palatinate to escape religious persecution and the general violence of the monarchical wars of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Wherever their numbers were great enough, these pacifist-minded immigrants banded together in Pennsylvania to form churches and to establish rural schools with religious services and instruction given in German alone. Although few were literate in English, as much as 80% of the population was literate in their native tongue, and the immigrant community was not without a printed culture; the newspapers and pamphlets already being printed in the New World by early arrivals like Christopher Sauer of Germantown were a valued supplement to the more sporadic supply of German-language texts provided by sister congregations in the Old World.<sup>45</sup>

The cultural distinctiveness of this thriving German community and its lack of interest in assimilating with the predominantly Anglo colonial culture was not at first viewed as a political problem for tolerant Pennsylvania. In the late 1740s, however, anti-German sentiment began to rise among the non-Quaker, English-speaking elites of Philadelphia, largely as a function of escalating conflicts within the colonial assembly and emerging military threats at the borders. The German population, initially politically inactive, was encouraged in the 1740s by the politically powerful Quakers to assert its strength in elections for the colonial assembly; forming a majority pacifist alliance, the Quakers and the Germans together fatefully opposed a proposal by Benjamin Franklin for the formation of a colonial militia to defend Pennsylvania settlements against raids by the French. The Quakers and Germans feared, and not without reason, that raising a standing militia would inevitably inflame tensions with the French, possibly precipitating a full scale war that would destroy settlements from the Susquehanna all the way to the Ohio—land predominantly settled by Germans. As a result of this electoral conflict, the English colonists increasingly began to question the loyalty of the German population to the colonial government, fearing that those Germans living in the wilderness of central and western Pennsylvania

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<sup>45</sup> Literacy estimate taken from Weber, "The Charity School Movement in Colonial Pennsylvania," 14.

might eventually be tempted to take the side of the French in the impending battles over the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes. In the light of escalating military conflicts, the autonomy of the German community became a political difficulty to be sorted out by colonial elites.

Fortunately for the English of Philadelphia, attempts were already underway by some religious organizations to expand educational access to the Germans in Pennsylvania; the Reverend Michael Schlatter of the German Reformed church, after having spent several years among settlers in Pennsylvania and Maryland, had made an appeal to the Reformed congregations of Holland and England for funds to support the construction of new schools throughout the region. Schlatter's plan received enthusiastic support from Franklin and his friend William Smith, soon to be appointed the first provost of the University of Pennsylvania, but Franklin and Smith wanted to put their own stamp on the arrangements. Franklin worried that because the Germans sought to maintain their cultural identity in the New World ("swarm[ing] into our Settlements" and "herding together" in a way that discouraged commerce and communication with the English colonists), they would "never adopt our Language or Customs."<sup>46</sup> Smith similarly complained in private correspondence, "One-half of the people are an uncultivated race of Germans, liable to be seduced by every enterprising Jesuit, having almost no Protestant Clergy among them to put them on their Guard, and warn them against Popery."<sup>47</sup>

Together, Franklin and Smith lobbied the primary philanthropic organization concerned with the matter, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge Among the Germans in Pennsylvania, for a more pointedly assimilationist curriculum to be established in the planned German schools. In a letter to the Society, Smith described his desired aims for the charity schools thus:

By a common education of English and German youth at the same schools, acquaintances and connections will be formed, and deeply impressed upon them in their cheerful and open moments.

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<sup>46</sup> Frasca, "To Rescue the Germans Out of Sauer's Hands': Benjamin Franklin's German-Language Printing Partnerships," 336.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Weber, "The Charity School Movement in Colonial Pennsylvania," 13.

The English language and a conformity of manners will be acquired, and they may be taught to feel the meaning and exult in the enjoyment of liberty, a home and social endearments. And when once these sacred names are understood and felt at the heart...no arts of our enemies will be able to divide them in their affection; and all the narrow distinctions of extraction, etc., will be forgot— forever forgot—in higher interests.<sup>48</sup>

On a generous reading, it is not the cultural distinctiveness of the German community in itself that Franklin and Smith believed posed a threat to the colony. Although the two men worried vaguely that continued German immigration might eventually overwhelm English culture in Pennsylvania, they did not raise serious objections to the *general* right of German settlers to continue their cultural practices in the New World. Their essential trepidation seemed to stem instead from the perceived dangers to the survival of the province presented by *particular* elements of the German colonists' life: their pacifism, their unusually non-obedient relation to their own ministers, and their cultural *isolation*—that is, their lack of interest in entering into conversation with the dominant English colonial culture. The distinction between the right of cultural distinctiveness and the need for political cooperation and conversation across differences, however, was never clearly articulated in the charity school plan; indeed, Franklin and Smith appeared incapable of hewing a middle path that would initiate a dialogue about the political needs of the colony. The only adequate resolution they could imagine to the political tensions produced by Pennsylvania's cultural divisions was the creation of a singular colonial culture that would harmonize the beliefs and interests of all; that culture would of course be English-speaking and mainline Protestant, requiring a full-scale cultural conversion on the part of many Pennsylvania Germans. The school and the printing press would be the primary instruments of that conversion.

Initially, the charity school plans formulated by Franklin, Smith, and the increasingly marginalized Schlatter, were met with some enthusiasm among the German settlements, as it was believed that the

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted by Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*.

free English schooling to be provided would be centralized in an academy in Philadelphia and would have little impact on the day to day existence of the separatist communities. When it became clear that the intentions behind the scheme were more pointedly directed at undermining the autonomy of the German community and that the motivation was a distrust of the Germans' pacifist sensibilities, however, the attitude of many colonists changed. Christopher Sauer, in his widely read German-language newspaper, *Pensylvanische Berichte*, editorialized thus:

The new society in England deserves praise for being so liberal and so kind as to teach the Germans the English tongue gratis. But if Schlatter has accused the Germans to such a degree and represented them as if they were a nation of so roguish and mischievous a disposition, that in time of war they would probably join the French and villainously espouse their cause, he has certainly acted with great imprudence, to the disadvantage of the King as well as of himself. None, indeed, will permit themselves to think that many Germans could be so treacherous as he perhaps may think. The Irish, the Swedes, and the Welsh keep their languages, yet for all that are not looked upon as a disloyal people. Oh, that pious school-masters in the English tongue might be given them, who could be to them a pattern of a true Christian life!<sup>49</sup>

In his letters from the time, Sauer elaborated further upon the causes for the growing popular resistance to the influence of the English schools, attributing its strength not least of all to the suspicion that the charitable "gift" of free schools would indebt the German electorate to the militarist plans of Franklin and Smith. Additionally, however, Sauer also notes simpler motivations concerning the arrangements of the schools themselves. Some German parents feared that too large a congregation of children—no matter their background or the language of their instruction—would encourage mischief and would thus undermine their moral instruction; others worried more specifically that if their children were mixed into a general school population of non-Germans, the second and third generations in the New World

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<sup>49</sup> From Sauer's *Pensylvanische Berichte*, 1 September 1754, quoted by Weber, "The Charity School Movement in Colonial Pennsylvania," 28–29.

would begin to turn on the culture and religion of their parents and grandparents.<sup>50</sup>

The worst suspicions of the German parents were in large part confirmed in 1755 and 1756 with the publication of pamphlets by Smith and Franklin characterizing the Germans variously as “insolent, sullen, and turbulent” and as “Palatine Boors” out to “Germanize” the English colonists.<sup>51</sup> Sauer printed and reprinted statements such as these throughout 1755 and 1756 as proof of the insidious designs of Schlatter, Franklin, Smith and company against the autonomy of the Germans’ culture and religions. Although several free English schools were in fact established in the settlements of southeastern Pennsylvania in the mid 1750s, and although Franklin directly contested Sauer’s criticisms of these schools in his alternative German newspaper, the *Philadelphische Zeitung*, the schools could never shake their public image of being tools for the destruction of separatist German culture. German children stayed away from the charity schools in droves, and, by 1764 the enterprise finally collapsed due to a lack of students as well as a lack of financial support from donors abroad. As educational historian Lawrence Cremin has noted, the most lasting impact of the charity school movement in Pennsylvania was perhaps to stiffen the resistance of German-speaking Pennsylvanians to the formation of common schools well into the 19<sup>th</sup>—and in some cases into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>—centuries.

The primary motivations behind the Pennsylvania plans for the formation of Anglicizing charity schools were ostensibly republican; that is, Franklin and Smith were concerned immediately about the prospect of defending their colony against the military threat posed by the French, and more generally about the capacity for the commonwealth to cooperatively act as a single political unit. In deploying the charity school as a primary tool of unification, however, Franklin and Smith failed to advance a new conception of a political community that would allow the various communities that constituted the colony to join together for the resolution of shared problems while maintaining their independent

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<sup>50</sup> Longenecker, *The Christopher Sauer: Courageous Printers Who Defended Religious Freedom in Early America*, 82.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Frasca, “‘To Rescue the Germans Out of Sauer’s Hands’: Benjamin Franklin’s German-Language Printing Partnerships,” 347.

cultural identity. Instead, Franklin and Smith merely translated the model of schooling for communal consolidation into an expansionist paradigm: rather than consolidating the cultural unity of the community, promoting trust and mutual assistance between community members, and facilitating communication between local authorities and townspeople, the charity schools would function as an agency of cultural *conversion*. The social unity to be effected by the schools would be of a form foreign to the German townships, and the education provided would serve among other things to detach German children from one community and reattach them to another. The Pennsylvania republic, Franklin and Smith's plans would seem to indicate, could only function if all citizens were brought into a single urban and Anglophone culture rooted in mainline Protestant religion.

What Sauer and the German immigrants immediately perceived in the philanthropic plans of Schlatter's Society was that the free schools being offered them were thus little more than superficially charitable agencies of cultural destruction. Instructing young Germans in English rather than German, they foresaw, would drive a wedge between the generations, giving children access to an English culture barred their parents; more crucially, however, it would also supplant the moral education offered by the various Anabaptist sects with the catechism of the Reformed Church. Parents, unable to interpret the particular doctrines being taught their children, would be at a loss to rebut or criticize the content of the school's moral and religious instruction. Sauer complained that as the English language invaded their communities, the Germans would be compelled "to hear English ministers preach and, being ignorant in that language, they would be obliged to sit in their meetings like geese, and hold their tongues like sheep."<sup>52</sup> Even if the quality of instruction in literacy and numeracy in the charity schools might have proven superior to the ad hoc arrangements of the settlements, and even if an education in English might reasonably have led to an increase in socio-economic opportunities for the children, the price to be paid—a loss of cultural self-determination for the Germans—was deemed too steep.

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 345.

If the American colonies were ever to be capable of organizing into a political unit prepared to cope with trans-communal social problems, a new model of social cooperation would have to be organized that respected the cultural self-determination of independent communities while also opening up lines of communication and cooperation across cultural boundaries. Rather than serving as a mechanism of cultural conversion, a truly republican deployment of the school would have to promote political attachments without destroying cultural commitments.

### **§3 The Citizenry and the Population in the Early Republic**

Neither the German nor the English communities of Pennsylvania in the 1750s had a conception of education that could distinguish between the formation of parochial cultural identity and the formation of broader, pluralist political communities; the only model of the school available to them followed the pattern of cultural consolidation and the subordination of individuals to communal authority so vividly represented by the schools of Puritan New England. Already in the next generation, however, mounting political pressures were demanding a gross revision in the parochial model of the school, and in the early days of the new American nation, innovative schemes for new modes of republican education flourished. Although few of these theoretical school systems found any foothold in actual governmental practice, they nevertheless bear witness to an ongoing attempt to reconceive the scattered American colonial communities as a *res publica*—a shared set of public affairs for which citizens must be trained to be responsible.

The first step forward in this new republican conception of political self-governance, bolstered by educational institutions, was the articulation of a theoretical separation of purely sectarian and local cultural concerns from truly public interests that demanded political action. Because of the notably heterogeneous makeup of its population, Pennsylvania was in many respects the state to grapple with the problem of cultural diversity the earliest—even if it proved slow to adopt the model of educational



institutions that would eventually attain national support. A generation after Franklin and Smith's failure to anglicize the Germans of Pennsylvania, another Philadelphia luminary, Dr. Benjamin Rush, once again set forth a proposal for the consolidation of Pennsylvania's political culture through the creation of publicly funded institutions of education. Unlike the failed charity school plan, however, Rush's 1786 plan did not conflate the unifying political needs of the republic with the essentially evangelical desire to homogenize national culture. Rush allowed that properly republican schools might operate in conjunction with and in support of locally distinct cultural practices, while simultaneously fostering the habits, skills, and emotional ties necessary for the self-governance and self-defense of the newly independent states of America.

At the most basic level, Rush recognized the validity of the German cultural presence by indicating that state-sponsored elementary education ought not be limited to instruction in the English language. "Let children be taught to read and write the English and German languages, and the use of figures," he writes in his proposal.<sup>53</sup> Rush further concedes that the districts of his proposed school system ought to be arranged "so that children of the same religious sect and nation may be educated as much as possible together."<sup>54</sup> Although in his private letters he still held out hope that the German settlers would eventually concede to having their children learn English, Rush foresaw that the linguistic change could not be forced. The Germans would have to be *convinced* that the English language was a useful tool for their children, as only an internally motivated choice on the part of German parents, "consistent with their liberty," could form the basis of a new republican political culture.<sup>55</sup> Similarly in the case of religion, Rush argued that although it was of the utmost importance that all young citizens be raised in accordance with the moral dictates of *some* religion, the precise denomination or sect implemented through the schools ought not be the subject of legislation. That pedagogical decision is not answerable

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<sup>53</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> The quotation from Rush's letters as well as the insight into Rush's attitude towards spreading English among the Germans are drawn from Heath, "Why No Official Tongue?," 24.

to governmental authority, but rather to parental and communal needs. “I only recommend to the persons entrusted with the education of youth, to inculcate upon them a strict conformity to that mode of worship which is most agreeable to their consciences, or the inclinations of their parents.”<sup>56</sup>

While such a confirmation of the link between religion and education still undeniably distinguishes this from the model of the secular public school that would emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rush’s recommendations nevertheless represent an important innovation in the history of American schooling. Rush and other republican thinkers of his milieu were beginning to separate the technology of the school from the uniformly parochial effects of socialization for which the Massachusetts Puritans, the Pennsylvania Germans, and other early American groups had first utilized it. While Franklin and Smith’s brand of early republicanism had attempted only to redeploy the parochial model of the school on a wider scale in order to homogenize cultural, linguistic, and religious identity across the colony, Rush attempted to separate some of the more contentious questions of cultural identity from what he saw as the genuinely public importance of the school. The *res publica* need not necessarily extend down into the religious and linguistic preferences of particular communities and families, Rush conceded; indeed, the preservation of separatist communities’ authority over their own cultural and religious matters was necessary for securing their allegiance to the new republic. Nevertheless, the question then arose what type of social or political organization would the school foster if it were no longer engaged in the purely parochial socialization it had previously been commissioned with. If the republic envisioned by Rush and his fellow travelers was organized neither to secure the eternal salvation of its members souls, nor to defend any one particular cultural heritage, for what purpose did it exist at all?

Rush’s contradictory but nevertheless fascinating answer to this question—the question of what type of social purpose the schools needed to serve over and above cultural reproduction—demonstrates quite vividly the competing ways in which social life was conceived of in late 18<sup>th</sup> century America.

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<sup>56</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 18.

Indeed, Rush's twin 1786 essays "A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania" and "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," evoke two contrasting conceptions of political and economic unity in order to justify an expansion in the deployment of the school beyond the communal model. On the one hand, Rush's defense of republican education entails a political deployment of the school, drawing on a conception of the state as a self-governing body of citizens united by a public spirit transcending material individual interests; on the other hand, Rush also offers a more strictly economic deployment of the school that conceives of the states as but a population, in the narrowly medical and economic sense of a collection of individuals bound together by cycles of production and reproduction. In the former case, public education is justified as a tool for the development of a virtuous citizenry capable of self-governance; in the latter, education becomes a means for improving national industry, commerce, security, and knowledge. To cite a distinction much discussed by Foucault in his 1978 lecture course, *Security, Territory, Population*, Rush's essays stand at the intersection of two contrasting modes of political reason developing over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—a juridical modality which conceived of the state as a self-governing *public* of mutually consenting subjects of right, and a governmental modality which conceived of the state as a *population* of productive and reproductive beings in need of scientific administration.<sup>57</sup>

The central struggle witnessed in Rush's essays is an internal struggle that characterizes the writings of most all of the Founders' writings on education: it is the question of which of these two competing conceptions of trans-communal social life would set the agenda for deploying America's developing educational institutions. Is the state a collection of individuals that interact purely economically, or is it a true polity of citizens engaged in cooperative self-governance? Should the school promote habits of industry and production, or should it promote virtues of civic engagement and political participation? Ultimately, the development of the school in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would follow a predominantly economic

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<sup>57</sup> See especially lecture 3 of Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 55–79.

deployment, but in Rush's late 18<sup>th</sup> century writings we can see more clearly the two choices that lay before educators at the beginning of the republic. Both schools of thought offered a path to avoid the errors of Franklin and Smith, who had overridden communal reproduction in the interests of national unity, but each would entail the construction of a radically different type of social existence beyond the walls of parochial communities, for inculcating the self-interested habits of a productive population is not necessarily compatible with encouraging robust political virtues of public concern. By separating these two strands of Rush's thought for closer inspection, I believe we can evaluate more clearly what political possibilities were lost in opting for an economic model of educational deployment over a more overtly republican model of the school.

### *§3.1 The Self-Governing Citizenry*

As noted above, Benjamin Rush, unlike his Philadelphian predecessors Franklin and Smith, consented that the diverse communities of Quakers, Mennonites, Dunkers, and others in the Pennsylvania hinterlands ought to be able to raise their children within the linguistic and cultural standards of their collective life. A central function of education was the reproduction of culture, and culturally unified communities had reasonable claims to exercise control over the education of their children. Nevertheless, this *prima facie* educational privilege was not an unimpeachable right, for like many other early American republican thinkers, Rush was also attuned to the problem of how the conduct of life within one community might negatively impact the affairs of other surrounding communities. While the experience of relative social isolation at the westward expanding edge of the new United States still sponsored the same communal autonomism that had been prominent in colonial life, the experience of intercultural friction and social dynamism in the metropolitan centers caused Rush and other social elites to begin thinking of the independent communities of the nation as tied together by a set of common social problems faced by all. Besides the obvious dangers of a foreign

monarch taking over the newly independent territory of the United States, Rush and the other framers were concerned by a variety of other possibilities: an inherited aristocracy might develop through the transference of wealth and power from generation to generation; the democratic public might easily be swayed by a popular demagogue to abandon the principles of self-governance; or the internal spread of factionalism could turn the communities of the nation violently against one another. The resolution or prevention of these types of trans-communal social problems necessitated that individuals emerge from the confines of their community and collectively decide how to respond, how to cope, or how to coexist. This urgent need for a citizenry capable of political dialogue and cooperation called out for educational institutions that could do more than shore up communal mores, and the school offered itself as a means for protecting the republic against these forms of dissolution in both a defensive and an offensive or constructive sense. The school was a useful defensive tool for inoculating the citizenry against the seductions of demagoguery, and it was also a reliable method of building the positive moral and legislative capacities necessary for self-governance.

On the first count, Rush expresses a concern that without the establishment of secure educational institutions, “An aristocratic or democratic junta may arise, that shall find its despotic views connected with the prevalence of ignorance and vice in the state.”<sup>58</sup> Echoing the arguments of Thomas Jefferson’s earlier “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” Rush establishes a connection between the diffusion of education among the public and the degree to which citizens are able to protect their independence from the designs of a would-be ruling class.<sup>59</sup> “Without learning men become Savages or Barbarians, and where learning is confined to a *few* people, we always find monarchy, aristocracy and slavery.”<sup>60</sup> Autonomous communities founded at the fringes of American society, inwardly focused on their own subsistence, might not think it necessary to educate their children in history or civics, focusing

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<sup>58</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Jefferson, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.”

<sup>60</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 3–4.

instead on a combination of religious inculcation and vocational training. But to prevent an aristocratic or economic elite from passing their privileges on from generation to generation, monopolizing power and forcing their will upon the nation, the mass of the people must be able to recognize “ambition under all its shapes,” as Jefferson put it, and defeat it.<sup>61</sup> In order to forestall the rise of tyranny, the broad, trans-communal public must guarantee that all individuals are given a basic education in history and literacy that would supplement the religious or cultural forms of knowledge passed on through communalist schools.

The dangers of internal sectarianism and democratic factionalism, however, would seem to call for interventions into character formation of the young in addition to their intellectual cultivation, for the mere transmission of knowledge would not be sufficient to combat the possibility of intra-national communities turning against one another. To prevent the citizenry from dividing against itself, Rush argues that educational institutions must not only teach children why such division would be destructive; it must also endow the young citizens of the nation with a certain patriotic sensibility that would affectively tie citizens both to one another and to the institution of the law. To knit individual citizens to one another, Rush argues that simple intermingling in sport or in science from an early age will cultivate long lasting ties of affection strong enough to cross cultural boundaries when national interest demands. “Young men who have trodden the paths of science together, or have joined in the same sports...generally feel, thro’ life, such ties to each other, as add greatly to the obligations of mutual benevolence.”<sup>62</sup> And in order to further tie citizens obediently to the institution of law, Rush advocates that youth be subordinated to the strong authority of a benevolent schoolmaster through their education, preventing them from exercising their own wills with full independence until they have reached adulthood:

By this mode of education, we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws, and thereby qualify

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<sup>61</sup> Jefferson, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” 235.

<sup>62</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 14.

them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age.<sup>63</sup>

The schoolmaster serves as a surrogate for the institutions of courts, legislators, and executives, and by learning habits of obedience to their teacher, children early learn civic disposition of respect for law that will easily translate to the national stage beyond their classroom.

In these three key respects, at least, Rush's school would seem not to have altered in too significant a degree the mechanisms of subjection first deployed within the communal schools of Puritan Massachusetts. In keeping with the pedagogical traditions of the colonies, Rush advocates an educational process that conveys a set of truths to all students, that encourages sentiments of trust and mutual assistance, and that inculcates habits of obedience. Rush's modifications to the colonial paradigm are thus far modest: certain historical and political knowledge must be taught in addition to religious truths; strong affective ties to community members must be supplemented by occasional intermingling with non-community members; and obedience to communal authority must harmonize with obedience to national institutions of law and order. These initial elements of Rush's republican deployment of the school allow the school to remain firmly ensconced in the activity of communal reproduction, adding in supplementary practices of national consolidation only in order to forestall cross-cultural enmity.

Beyond these defensive measures, however, Rush and other early republicans also advocated a more positively constructive curriculum that would train citizens to exercise an active role in the legislation and governance of their country. It is under this heading, I believe, that the most innovative features of republican education as conceived by the revolutionary generation come to light. For while both colonial and republican models of education alike emphasized mutual subjection to a common

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24.

authority—whether it be the authority of scripture or of the written law—many political and educational writers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by ancient examples, asserted the further need for a reflective and revisionary attitude towards that authority that would seem to be in explicit contradiction to the communal valuation of obedience.

Rush, for example, argued that while the American pupil must be obedient to the authority of the law, he must not thereby think of it as a fixed thing outside of his sphere of influence. He must be endowed with a more active and distinctively progressive disposition towards the laws of his state:

He must be taught that there can be no durable liberty but in a republic, and that government, like all other sciences, is of a progressive nature. The chains which have bound this science in Europe are happily unloosed in America. *Here* it is open to investigation and improvement.<sup>64</sup>

The obligation to continuously improve the operations of government, furthermore, is not limited to a single class of the people; Rush asserts that the form of government adopted by the new American nation—a form in which “every citizen is liable to be a soldier and a legislator”—extends “a new class of duties to every American.”<sup>65</sup> Samuel Adams, in a letter to his younger cousin John Adams, echoes Rush’s conception of an active republican disposition when he asserts an “uncontroulable essential right of the People to amend, and alter, or annul their Constitution, and frame a new one, whenever they shall think it will better promote their own welfare, and happiness to do it.” To ensure that future generations of citizens possess the skills and dispositions requisite for the responsible exercise of this republican activity of self-governance, Adams concurs with Rush that “Seminaries of Literature” and “nurseries of Virtue” must be established that imbue the public with intelligence, public spirit, and responsibility.

Rush’s and Adams’ advocacy of the republican virtues of self-governance introduces an entirely new element into the deployment of the school. While in the early life of the American colonies, education

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 13, 30.



could be safely deployed purely as an instrument of cultural reproduction or communal consolidation, Rush and Adams—echoing ideas of Jefferson and other early republican thinkers—perceived that the continued growth and development of the nation would provoke new problems which culturally separated communities would have to resolve cooperatively. Citizens in the new nation could no longer lock themselves up within the collective affairs of their culturally unified community; they would have to work together through the medium of law and progressive governmental “science” to intelligently respond to the circumstances of their shared social experience. While the school might still convey cultural knowledge, promote bonds of trust and mutual assistance, and encourage a disposition of obedience to law, a republican deployment of the school would have to ready children for life as active citizens. To construct the self-governing polity, the school would have to teach children that the law of the land was theirs to remake as well as give them the skills of argumentation and inquiry necessary for them to take the reins of government into their own hands.<sup>66</sup>

### *§3.2 The Productive Population*

Although it is the political deployment of the school for republican education that attracts the most attention from historians looking to understand the roots of today’s school system, it is important to note that this was not the only model of the school developed in the early American republic—and in fact it would not prove to be the most educationally influential conception in the coming decades. The writings of Jefferson, Adams, and Rush had carved out a novel role for education in the new republic; it could be a means to the development of political capacities, as well as a tool for reproducing cultural forms of communal life. This republican ideal, however, failed to capture the passionate support of the public to which it was addressed. The need to defend the new nation from tyranny and cultural splintering was apparently an urgent task only for a select group of writers and statesmen, and for most,

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<sup>66</sup> Adams, “Letter to John Adams, November 25, 1790,” 344.

the case for political capacity-building did not overcome their widespread distaste for higher taxes, their mistrust of the extension of governmental power, and their implicit preference for conserving traditional arrangements.<sup>67</sup> Jefferson's bill failed to receive legislative approval during his lifetime; Rush's plan gained no traction in Pennsylvania politics; Adams' paeans to the beneficent hand of education had little impact upon the already ensconced curricula of Massachusetts' local schools.

Even as the articulation of a novel conception of collective, political autonomy in the theoretical treatises of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century produced little change in American educational reality, an alternative, economic vision of the role of schools in the new society was already developing that would prove far more influential in directing the future course of educational development. While the likes of Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson exalted a participatory model of republican political unity, other late 18<sup>th</sup> century American writers sketched out an alternative conception of the ties that bound together the new nation—a conception that was grounded not in a common desire to prevent political tyranny, but rather in the comparatively private fears of crime, poverty, and disease. This medico-economic conception of the state, which represents social life as a circulation of wealth and health between productive subjects, thus represents an alternative, anti-political legacy the revolutionary generation bequeathed to American educational institutions.<sup>68</sup>

It is perhaps surprising, given his strong republican leanings, that it is in Benjamin Rush's essays that we most clearly find articulated this nascent medical and economic understanding of the commonwealth forming in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; but of course we must remember that, unlike his fellow republicans Jefferson and Adams, Rush was a physician interested in the causes behind the spread of disease, the effects of punishment on criminal behavior, and the efficacy of various treatments in correcting mental illness. While in one breath, therefore, Rush idealistically extols the virtues of

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<sup>67</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> We might also label this model "biopolitical," following Foucault's designation of this new form of governmental science Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

republican self-governance, in the next breath, with characteristic medical curiosity, Rush will change perspectives to view the public as a population of patients and as an object of scientific scrutiny, searching out the causes of disease, degeneration, and criminality. When he adopts this medical perspective, Rush no longer thinks of individuals as citizens in charge of their own political fate; he views them instead as biological and economic agents whose activities can be shaped, augmented, or prohibited by governmental policy according to the needs of the state.

Rush's discussion of crime, along with his analysis of educational institutions as a potential solution to the problem of criminality, provides a vivid example of how the medico-economic conception of the nation as a population, rather than a public, leads to an educational deployment vastly divergent from the republican model of the school. In an idiom reminiscent of his medical treatises on mental illness and the spread of disease, Rush depicts the problem of crime as a problem of generalized contagion circulating through the body politic, and he decries the influx of vice and criminal habits into Pennsylvania from the "annual refuse of the jails of Britain, Ireland, and our sister states."<sup>69</sup> Men are not born criminals, in Rush's analysis, but crime appears in the first instance because all individuals are susceptible to the danger of falling into a life of vice and crime depending upon the environment in which they are raised. Like many of his contemporaries, and indeed much like successive generations of educational reformers following him, Rush ties the incidence of the criminal 'type' with a lack of early education: "The confessions of these criminals generally show us," he notes, "that their vices and punishments are the fatal consequences of the wants of a proper education in early life."<sup>70</sup> Lacking the guidance of an early formation of character and an early training in a productive enterprise, individuals find themselves without the moral guidance of some set of religious principles, without skills for profitable employment, and without the knowledge even to recognize their own state of dissolution. In the absence of such internal regulatory mechanisms, the baser biological instincts find uninhibited

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<sup>69</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

expression, wrecking havoc on the individual's chance to find a proper and productive place in society.

The danger of crime extends further, however, for the negative effects resulting from the vices of these uneducated criminals are not limited in their scope to the personal lives of the criminals themselves nor even to their immediate victims. The criminal way of life threatens to infect all sectors of the population by the same force that it has already infected individual criminals: by the power of temptation and negative example. "Fathers of children who may be corrupted and disgraced by bad examples," Rush exclaims, "can nothing be done to preserve our morals, manners, and government, from the infection of European vices?"<sup>71</sup> Vicious character, when viewed by impressionable minds, exerts an attraction that is difficult for parents and educators to counteract, and given the increasing rates of immigration to Pennsylvania from the already diseased shores of Europe, Rush worries children will soon see more examples of crime in their community than of virtue and industry. It is not just children for whom Rush expresses concern, however, for adults as well as children are susceptible to the seductive power of the criminal example—particularly those of infirm character. Rush recounts cases in which crowds before the scaffold have been swayed to demonstrate sympathy for the criminal type during rituals of public punishment. In an extended essay arguing against the spectacle of public punishments Rush complains that the scaffold is too frequently the scene of the criminal's ennoblement; the public finds in the clash between the laws of the state and the lawless vagabond cause to celebrate the free and easy life of the latter.<sup>72</sup> The most insidious danger that crime presents to productive society, therefore, is not the immediate damage it inflicts upon individual citizens and their property; rather, it is the contagious force of temptation that causes criminality to spread throughout the population.

Other means of punishment and prevention must therefore be sought in the state's fight against

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>72</sup> Rush, "An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society." Compare to Foucault's discussion of this phenomenon in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

criminal degeneracy—mechanisms that would make the attraction of criminality all but invisible and replace its image with noble exemplars of virtue and communal responsibility. “In contemplating the political institutions of the United States, I lament, that we waste so much time and money in punishing crimes, and take so little pains to prevent them,” Rush writes.<sup>73</sup> Immigration controls are the most pressing and potent solution Rush proposes for the problem of criminality, but it is by no means the only solution he offers. Penitentiaries must be established to withhold criminality from infecting the main body of the population and to render it invisible; new methods of humane moral reform must be sought within the prisons and mental wards of public hospitals to turn the criminal away from the life of crime; and most importantly, from Rush’s perspective, the healthy and non-criminal inhabitants of the state must protect themselves prophylactically, as it were, through education.<sup>74</sup>

Rush’s medico-economic analysis of crime informs the deployment of education in two distinct capacities. First, education can serve to stop the spread of criminal vice if the schools teach children to observe some virtue-encouraging religious doctrine. Rush is not particular about *which* religious principles are inculcated in the young—“I had rather see the opinions of Confucius or Mahomed inculcated upon our youth, than see them grow up wholly devoid of a system of religious principles”—so long as they are inoculated from the attraction of vice by some doctrine of divine punishment and reward.<sup>75</sup> In this first aspect, therefore, the medico-economic conception of the population need not greatly modify the communal deployment of the school already prevalent in early America. Much the same way that the Massachusetts Puritans prescribed education as an essential bulwark against the proliferation of idleness, disobedience, and crime, Rush likewise turns to the establishment of schools internal to religious communities as the leading preventative measure in the battle against criminal contagion. The only modification from the communal deployment in this respect would be the need for

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<sup>73</sup> Rush, “An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society,” 112.

<sup>74</sup> Rush, “An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society.”

<sup>75</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 15.

governmental mechanisms ensuring that *all* subjects are raised within some character-forming moral tradition.

Crucially, however, education's cultural power of moral character-formation is supplemented in Rush's scheme, by an additional program of economic socialization. The social disease of criminality cannot be combated solely through teaching children religious principles of punishment and reward but additionally by engaging them positively in the work of bettering their material circumstances through industry and production. This additional element of the school's deployment overrides traditional cultural authority over education insofar as some faiths or moral systems might object to the materialistic influences of entrepreneurial training, but Rush insists that the degenerative influence of criminality on national health and wealth must be combated through the cultivation of strong productive forces within the population. In particular, Rush advises teachers to encourage the student's natural acquisitive instincts and to assist them in their desire to pursue the enlargement of their estates by providing them with the knowledge needed to launch new enterprises. The sciences of agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation are singled out as particularly promising courses of study insofar as these economic enterprises are the foundation of "national wealth and happiness."<sup>76</sup> Whatever course these economic desires take in an individual's life, however, Rush emphasizes that "above all he must love life, and endeavour to acquire as many of its conveniences as possible by industry and oeconomy."<sup>77</sup>

It is arguably in passages such as these, where Rush envisions the progress of the nation through entrepreneurial education, that the image of the state as a population—a collective body brought together by biological and economic necessity—emerges in sharp juxtaposition to the image of the unified and self-governing republic. The school, as it appears here, is not deployed to equip students with the virtues of political cooperation, public spirit, and self-governance. Rather, the economic

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 22.

deployment of the school turns the institution into an agency for regulating and guarding the functional health of a productive population. The school channels the desires of the individual student into paths that promote the growth of national wealth, providing the students with economically useful forms of knowledge and the habits of character that will enable him to put that knowledge to work. The autonomous republic, collectively united in a political project of self-governance, is in these passages overshadowed by an economic population whose growth and development is determined entirely by the productive enterprise of desirous individuals.

On Rush's understanding, of course, these two collective entities—the republic and the population—are inseparable, even mutually reinforcing; the population provides the strength, the resources, and the productivity that is then employed by the state for accomplishing the ends chosen republican self-governance. These two dimensions of the collective existence of the state find their point of intersection and conjunction in the character of the individual, who is simultaneously a private entrepreneur seeking personal profit and a public citizen dedicated to the good of the republic. The task of producing these contradictory dispositions rests, naturally, on the shoulders of the school, and in a striking series of contradictory prescriptions, Rush exposes, despite himself, the potential incompatibility of the political and economic missions of making students into citizens and producer-consumers simultaneously—harmonizing two contradictory impulses within the same soul.

Let our pupil be taught...to love his family, but let him be taught, at the same time, that he must forsake and even forget them, when the welfare of his country requires it. He must watch for the state as if its liberties depended upon his vigilance alone, but he must do this in such a manner as not to defraud his creditors, or neglect his family. He must love private life, but he must decline no station...when called to it by the suffrages of his fellow-citizens...He must be taught to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the state...Above all he must love life, and endeavour to acquire as many of its conveniences as possible

by industry and oeconomy, but he must be taught that this life 'is not his own,' when the safety of his country requires it.<sup>78</sup>

Rush placed his faith in a school system that could foster both of these dispositions in the character of the student, safeguarding the autonomy of the republic by directing private desires toward the augmentation of the state. The tension between these two projects is palpable, however; in one breath, civic obligations are placed above private, and in the next, personal and familial wellbeing are elevated above the state.

The revolutionary moment in history during which Rush produced his educational treatises opened up possibilities for multiple new forms of collective life; the American states could choose any one of a number of avenues for bringing together their disparate communities beyond the boundaries of culture, and Rush held out hopes that cultural, political, and economic development could all be bolstered through the institution of the school. As the public school system was piece by piece assembled over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the governmental rationality that came to define the goals, methods, and organization of public education was indebted almost entirely to the medico-economic model. 19<sup>th</sup> century Common School advocates envisioned the young American nation in terms of its circulatory flows of wealth and poverty, health and sickness, virtue and vice, much in the same vein as Rush's medical analyses had suggested. While lip service was of course still paid to the idealistic goals of republican self-governance, in practice, it was the hard-nosed economic rationality of national wealth, health, and security that informed actual educational practice. Nevertheless, the alternate possibility of a republican school, designed to promote a self-governing citizenry, never ceased to haunt the practice of education. As we move forward to examine the economic assemblage of the Common School, therefore, we cannot forget the claims of the republican model; we must continually question whether there are not still problems and tensions within American social experience that call out for the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 20–22.



redeployment of a school dedicated to fostering a self-governing polity in addition to a productive economy or a self-sustaining community.

#### **§4 The Common School Movement and Its Critics**

The revolutionary generation, I have argued, stood at a historically unique juncture in the development of American education, with two theoretically distinct but frequently blurred conceptions of social unity orienting plans for new deployments of the school: on the one hand, an explicitly political model that would use the school to produce collectively minded republican citizens trained in the skills of self-governance; and a predominantly medico-economic model in which the material desires of the populace would be channeled into avenues suitable for the growth of national wealth. Each of these programs sought to form a coherent collective existence for the new nation by directing the moral and intellectual growth of its individual members, but the different types of collectivity imagined by these two educational regimes would seem to call for divergent sets of habits, capacities, and relationships to be fostered within and around the individual subject.

None of the public educational schemes constructed on paper by the likes of Rush, Jefferson, or Adams, however, ever found full realization in brick and mortar institutions in the early republic, hampered as they were by cost-conscious legislatures, a largely scattered agrarian population, and widespread parochial and sectarian sensibilities that viewed with suspicion any governmental plan to draw distinct communities more closely together. The revolutionary leaders' educational plans grounded the need for tax-supported schools in a forceful articulation of the unique set of shared problems facing the new country, but this perceived need for a new, more cosmopolitan form of national unity was not shared by most Americans at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most Americans understood their political and economic well being to depend more on the healthy moral and religious environment of their local community than on the abstract ties of national unity. In a telling moment of

frustration after multiple failures in the passage of his educational legislation, Thomas Jefferson blamed the continued underdevelopment of Virginia's schools upon the "ignorance, malice, egoism, fanaticism, religious, political, and local perversities" of his fellow citizens.<sup>79</sup> While political leaders found a plethora of reasons to expand the reach of the public school, the still disconnected communities of the new nation did not understand their political and economic ties to one another to be of great enough consequence to justify fundamentally altering traditional educational customs. As educational historian Carl Kaestle has argued, "the Revolution was not a social cataclysm," and the communalist educational attitudes of the citizenry continued largely unabated.<sup>80</sup>

Over the next five decades, however, a variety of shifting social dynamics conspired to precipitate precisely the sort of "cataclysm" apparently required to catalyze educational ferment. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, schools were still but few and scattered irregularly about the countryside, and informal kitchen table educational arrangements predominated, serving largely the same set of functions that they had in colonial society: securing the obedience of the young to familial and parochial authorities; inculcating religious faith; and promoting the practical skills needed for communal self-sufficiency. By the onset of the Civil War, however, the electorates of most of the large urban centers of the industrial North had consented—more easily in some cases than in others—to the establishment of radically expanded systems of compulsory, tax-supported schooling that far outstripped the efforts of even the most assiduous Puritan community of previous generations.<sup>81</sup> Education had emerged as a public good not to be relegated to the community initiative or the care of potentially unreliable parents; schooling was now perceived as a governmental obligation essential to the survival of the nation as a whole. The dreams of the republican thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it would seem on the surface, would finally be brought to fruition by 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers as the public began to recognize itself as a single

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<sup>79</sup> Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," 258.

<sup>80</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 10.

<sup>81</sup> For a lucid analysis of the *systematization* of American education in this era, see Chapters 1-3 of Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*.

body unified by common concerns.

The Common School that was born out of this mid-century reform movement, however, bore but a passing resemblance to the types of “republican seminaries” and “nurseries of virtue” endorsed by Rush and Adams.<sup>82</sup> Even if school reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century still tied their evangelical educational crusade rhetorically to the republican philosophy of the revolutionary generation, the immediate public needs that precipitated the sea change in legislative and administrative support for the Common School had little to do with the aspiration of training citizens in the art of self-governance. Instead, as historian Michael Katz has argued, the establishment of America’s first full-fledged public educational systems owed much more to the collapse of traditional social arrangements in the face of rapid economic change than it did to any desire for democratic political unification, and these precipitating socio-economic conditions of the school’s emergence had a profound influence upon its structure and future trajectory.<sup>83</sup> In short, it was the medico-economic rationality of managing health and wealth within the population that would orient the construction of America’s first true public school systems, often at the expense of the political goals of republican self-governance.

The triumph of the economic deployment of the school was part of a much larger trend of bureaucratization and institutionalization in American life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was propelled forward by radical economic and demographic changes. As urbanizing states like Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut—some of the pioneers of the Common School movement—experienced exponential growth in the size and diversity of their urban populations in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they quickly discovered that the now-familiar urban problems of poverty, disease, crime, and unemployment quite suddenly exploded beyond the coping capacities of earlier communal mechanisms. Poverty, crime, and disease were of course not utterly novel problems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Americans had generally attempted to deal with these social dysfunctions on a smaller scale by

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<sup>82</sup> Rush, *A Plan for Public Schools*, 30; Adams, “Letter to John Adams, November 25, 1790,” 347.

<sup>83</sup> See Chapter 1 of Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*.

absorbing marginal inhabitants—the impoverished, the insane, the delinquent—back into communal life through purely informal and parochial mechanisms. Almshouses, reform schools, and prisons were generally viewed with suspicion in colonial society; they were untrusted substitutes for the more reliable relationships of the family, the church, and the close-knit community—what historian David Rothman identifies as the “three critical associations” of colonial life.<sup>84</sup> The scale and rapidity of urbanization in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, actively undermined these informal methods of community regulation, breaking apart traditional familial relations and infusing communities with new populations of migrants who lacked settled connections to their neighbors and associates.

The case of the “strolling poor” provides a clear illustration of how economic and demographic changes in the first century of American democracy propelled the development of new institutions of socio-economic governance.<sup>85</sup> Poverty and economic hardship were not problems unknown to colonial New England, but these problems were usually dealt with at a communal level, with each township expected to provide informal charitable relief to those individuals or families hit by hardship through familial or religious institutions. Families and churches provided food aid, while apprenticeships and home labor could productively employ adolescents or adults struck by economically crippling misfortune. As the apprenticeship system withered under conditions of industrialization, and as most manual work moved outside of the home to large mills or workshops, young men and women in search of employment increasingly were forced to move from their birth-communities to large urban centers, where they often possessed no familial or congregational connections to help them in times of crisis. Already in the 1790s, some Selectmen in Massachusetts expressed concern that the new “strolling poor”—permanently transient individuals who moved from town to town in search of work and economic assistance—represented a threat to the stability of their communities, not only because they drained the public coffers, but more disconcertingly because they lacked any settled connection to the

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<sup>84</sup> Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, 16.

<sup>85</sup> Lamar Jones, “The Strolling Poor: Transiency in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts.”

community through family or church.<sup>86</sup> In the space of about sixty years between the 1790s and the 1850s, this new chronically underemployed class of mobile laborers became an entrenched feature of Northeastern life, disconcerting both town elites and the common populace who worried about the rise of crime and the collapse of communal mores.<sup>87</sup>

The new mobility of unattached migrants from the countryside, combined with the continuing influx of immigrants from the Old World, created an urban population too large and variegated in composition to be effectively incorporated into old communal structures, and social elites in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century began to search for ways to cope with these emergent problems. The core urban problems, in the view of many of the reform agencies tasked to resolve them, were essentially problems stemming from the unregulated circulation of unhealthful or degenerative influences: vice, poverty, ignorance, and crime would spread rapidly through a population that lacked the stability of communally guaranteed mores. The analysis offered by a special committee to the New York legislature on the evils of “Tenant Houses” offers a vivid example of how these trans-communal problems of social disease lent support to a program of expanding governmental institutions of social reform:

... vice and crime are epidemic in nature; their moral malaria spreading with as much certainty and deadly effect as does the most malignant type of contagious disease. The presence of crime or its incentives, the neighborhood of a vicious population, the frequency of felonious acts, whether punished or not, are constitute active agencies for the increase of social corruption...should we not, by wise laws, foreseeing safeguards, and watchful social vigilance, so hedge in the hurtful element, that it shall at once quietly yield to improving influences, become accustomed to salutary checks, and ultimately thankful for the humane provisions which at once educate its ignorance and protect

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*, 14.

the community from its errors?<sup>88</sup>

If Americans of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had been reluctant to accept governmental solutions to the common social dysfunctions of crime, poverty, and vice, the new urban experience, combined with a convincing medico-economic diagnosis of social decay, attacked the very roots of communalist reluctance. Because transient, migratory populations already overtaxed communities' economic resources, and because increasing diversity lent social life an air of fragmentation and crisis, the warning of criminal contagion and moral degeneracy sounded by 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers appealed directly to the concerns of community leaders spread throughout the states. Family, church, and community might have been sufficient resources for coping with social dysfunction in the past, but when multiplied in the new urban environments, social ills of unemployment and transiency would undercut the very resources of solidarity and self-support that had enabled communities to regulate their own affairs in the past. If the autonomous community was no longer sufficient, then new tools of broader social governance from outside and above the community would have to intervene with wise laws and vigilant policy to secure the process of social reform and regulation.

In the search for governmental tools for confronting the challenges of urban circulations of poverty, crime, and vice, the school had multiple virtues to recommend it to legislative reformers and other "political philanthropists." First and foremost, the school's scope extended beyond that of any existing institution to influence the constitution and character of the great majority of the population. As Horace Mann, the leading advocate of the new Common School system, argued, "they are the only civil institution capable of extending its beneficent arms to embrace and to cultivate in all parts of its nature every child that comes into the world."<sup>89</sup> In their universal influence, furthermore, the schools stood apart from so many other governmental mechanisms that relied upon quarantine and punishment to

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<sup>88</sup> New York State Legislature, *Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Examine Into the Condition of Tenant Houses in New York and Brooklyn*, 47–49.

<sup>89</sup> Mann, "Report for 1839," 10.

effect positive social change; the school presented an opportunity not simply to limit the spread of vice but rather to positively fortify the population against its pernicious influence. Mann accordingly warned the Massachusetts legislature that they had a choice between spending their funds on expensive remedial measures or more cost-effective preventative institutions.

Governments do not see the future criminal or pauper in the neglected child, and therefore they sit calmly by, until roused from their stupor by the cry of hunger or the spectacle of crime. Then they erect the almshouse, the prison, and the gibbet, to arrest or mitigate the evils which timely caution might have prevented.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, through their expert administration, the schools also offered the elite men of society a chance to regulate the sometimes unreliable or pernicious moral influences of backwards communities. In Mann's words, "[the schools] are an instrument by which the good men in society can send redeeming influences to those children who suffer under the calamity of vicious parentage and evil domestic associations."<sup>91</sup> In the minds of social reformers, the institution of the school, disorganized and parochial as it might have been in the past, lent itself to the resolution of the new urban problems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the school could exercise a positive impact on the character of each and every member of society at an impressionable young age, placing them in a healthful milieu and reconstructing their character according to the wisdom of the nation's "good men."

Before the school could be pressed into service, however, the pedagogical and administrative mechanisms of the institution would first have to be retooled to better meet the situation of general moral and economic degeneration lamented by the day's social reformers. The colonial and early republican schools, after all, were agencies of cultural consolidation and religious inculcation; not only had these institutions proven administratively incapable of coping with large and diverse urban populations, they also could not be relied upon to provide the right set of values, habits, and skills

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<sup>90</sup> Mann, Report for 1845, 424.

<sup>91</sup> Mann, "Report for 1839," 10.

necessary to overcome the moral and economic problems of the day. Consequently, the deployment of the school to meet contemporary socio-economic problems would have to proceed along three interdependent vectors: first, locally autonomous control over schools would have to be surrendered, in varying degrees, to the control and oversight of bureaucratic echelons of expert educators; secondly, the school's curriculum would have to be coordinated to match the needs of the nation's industry; and thirdly, the pedagogical and disciplinary mechanisms of classroom instruction would have to be modified to ensure that all children were properly trained in the virtues of production, obedience, and perseverance necessary for individual and national success. Each of these three vectors of the school's economic deployment bears closer description and analysis.

On the first count, the extension of centralized bureaucratic control over the school proceeded along a number of diverse fronts, not always unified in curricular objectives, but always with a singular goal of homogenizing educational activities to conform to the wisdom of society's "good men." Even in advance of the more obvious bureaucratic innovations like the formation of superintendencies and state boards of education, evangelical groups like the American Sunday School Union began the long process of educational centralization in the 1820s by standardizing textbooks and literacy materials.<sup>92</sup> The ASSU, historian David Tyack explains, "had definite notions of what a standard American Christian should be like, and from their positions of power in the metropolis they tried to shape the mentality of people in the countryside to this design."<sup>93</sup> By producing standardized tracts and lesson plans in high volume, undercutting the price of all other available texts, and appointing district managers to sell the virtues of their materials to town notables, the ASSU ensured that their reading materials and their lesson plans were the resources of choice for struggling schools and charity operations around the country. The Union's mission was explicitly to become the "dictators of the consciences of thousand of immortal beings," and the tool of standardized school texts offered a direct avenue to the souls of children across

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<sup>92</sup> Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*, 35–37.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



the nation.<sup>94</sup>

The ASSU's extra-governmental efforts at curricular standardization, however, were but an early blueprint for the centralization and bureaucratization that would be effected on a larger scale through state sanctioned agencies over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his careful study of the Boston school system between the years of 1850 and 1884, historian Michael Katz elucidates the variety of techniques that later school reformers deployed in order to bring oversight and educational control into the hands of centralized state administrators. Control over printed lesson materials remained a key vector of educational centralization, but in Massachusetts the establishment of normal schools for teacher training further ensured that the delivery of lessons within the classroom could be regulated according to the standards of pedagogical expertise.<sup>95</sup> The control exercised by lay school boards over local grammar schools was further eroded by the establishment of professional superintendency positions, authorized to appoint a "board of supervisors" who would observe and critique the conduct of pedagogy in each classroom.<sup>96</sup> And presiding over the exercise of these mechanisms of centralization, of course, was the newly established state Board of Education, whose initial commission as an advisory committee was greatly expanded by the charismatic yearly reports of the Board's first president, Horace Mann, to the state legislature.<sup>97</sup> From the rise of the ASSU in the 1820s, through the emergence of the Massachusetts State Board of Education and the eventual institution of district superintendencies across the nation, American education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became increasingly bureaucratized as authority over educational matters was transferred from the hands of unreliable local communities to the ranks of pedagogical experts.

The centralization of the school's administration, however, was merely an instrumental technique that would enable proper curricular goals to be effected through the newly bureaucratized school

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>95</sup> Katz, "From Voluntarism to Bureaucracy in American Education," 317.

<sup>96</sup> Katz, "The Emergence of Bureaucracy in Urban Education: The Boston Case, 1850-1884: Part I," 161.

<sup>97</sup> Katz, "From Voluntarism to Bureaucracy in American Education," 305.

systems. In addition to creating a centralized administrative system, economically minded school reformers also needed to create an educational agenda that would promote national productivity, and they achieved this goal in large part through direct consultation with leaders of business and industry in their states. This coordination between pedagogy and industry constituted the second central vector in the economic deployment of the school, and in many cases such coordination was seamless insofar as it was the business leaders themselves who exercised control over the constitution of the newly centralized curricula. Analyzing the demographics of Common School support in industrializing towns like Boston and Lowell, Massachusetts, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have argued in their classic study *Schooling in Capitalist America* that the bulk of pro-reform sentiment and corresponding political direction stemmed from the “propertied” classes of merchants, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and “well-to-do artisans.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, many 19<sup>th</sup> century reports corroborate the solicitous interest the upper and middling classes displayed towards the matter of education. As one cotton mill manager, Homer Bartlett, noted in 1841, “the owners of manufacturing property have a deep pecuniary interest in the education and morals of their help,” and thus it was no surprise to find them presiding over the selection of superintendents or spearheading efforts to centralize urban school districts.<sup>99</sup>

The governmental leaders of the Common School movement, such as Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, furthermore did explicitly reach out to the business community in order to dictate what skills and virtues the school might teach in order to promote the cause of national industry. As Mann’s annual reports on education delivered to the Massachusetts state legislature demonstrate time and again, it was the deep-seated conviction of the business community, shared by many of the owners and managers of Northeastern textile mills, that a lack of formal education produced an almost incurable deficiency in an individual’s character, making him unreliable, undisciplined, and unproductive. In his

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<sup>98</sup> Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*, 160–161.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 162.

1847 report, Horace Mann quotes one mill floor manager who comments

So confident am I that production is affected by the intellectual and moral condition of help, that, whenever a mill or a room should fail to give the proper amount of work, my first inquiry, after that respecting the condition of the machinery, would be *as to the character of the help*; and, if the deficiency remained any great length of time, I am sure that I should find many who had made their marks upon the pay-roll, being unable to write their names; and I should be greatly disappointed, if I did not, upon inquiry, find a portion of them of irregular habits and suspicious character.<sup>100</sup>

Mann, as well as Barnard and other New England leaders, responded to these managerial observations by distilling a set of character traits and moral habits from the needs of industry and formulating these into an educational agenda. Bowles and Gintis' study of 19<sup>th</sup> century education offers a careful analysis of the core pedagogical goal of "industriousness"—almost uniformly praised by all 19<sup>th</sup> century New England school leaders—that demonstrates how this central moral concept embraced an entire suite of habits and dispositions that it was believed would better suit the urban poor for employment in the industrial setting: perseverance, punctuality, obedience, predictability, etc.<sup>101</sup> Although it is undoubtedly true that 19<sup>th</sup> century educational reformers gleaned their curricular objectives from diverse sources other than the voices of industry and commerce, as many historians have been at pains to point out, it also nevertheless true that many of the core virtues and skills ensconced in the Common School curriculum were designed precisely to serve the needs of augmenting national productivity.<sup>102</sup>

The centralization of bureaucratic control over the schools and the distillation of an economically centered set of curricular objectives, however, had further to be implemented through innovative pedagogical mechanisms before the economic deployment could be complete. The creation of a unified

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<sup>100</sup> Mann, "Report for 1847," 564.

<sup>101</sup> See chapters 4 and 5 of Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*.

<sup>102</sup> Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 141; Katznelson and Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal*, 151.

pedagogical and disciplinary strategy for inculcating virtues of industry and reliability into the habits of individual students thus constituted the third and final vector of the economic deployment of the school. One traditional mechanism for character formation was the rote memorization of moral maxims, and this technique was utilized in 19<sup>th</sup> century textbooks just as it had been in the time of the colonies. Just as the *New England Primer* of colonial education had done, newer textbooks like *McGuffey's Reader*, which quickly colonized 19<sup>th</sup> century schoolrooms, still instructed children in the basic virtues of honesty, filial obedience, and piety. Such bland and benign moral lessons in the traditional virtues, however, were overshadowed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century curriculum by the emergence of a reinvigorated emphasis upon the evils of idleness and the rewards of industry. As historian Carl Kaestle has noted, the virtue of hard-work had been a frequent theme in Protestant education stretching back through Benjamin Franklin's almanac to early Puritan religious culture, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this theme was given a new life when it was more explicitly and directly tied to worldly, rather than purely spiritual, success. Kaestle offers a selection of illustrative maxims from a variety of mid-century schoolbooks, ranging from the simple assertion that "the idle boy is almost invariably poor and miserable," to the more strident declaration that "all the ignorance, degradation, and misery in the world is the result of indolence and vice." One reader promised that the "Diligent Scholar" would easily find work in a store or as an apprentice, for "many people who have heard of his good character will wish to have him."<sup>103</sup> Rather than shaming the child for embarrassing his community by his lack of motivation to work, the curriculum taught the child that his future personal success and monetary gain depended upon the alacrity with which he completed his work in the schoolhouse.

This general pedagogical goal of inculcating industrious character spread far outside of textbooks, however, influencing reforms in school discipline, in classroom architecture, and in the methods used to monitor and evaluate student progress through the curriculum. The 1830s and 40s were a time of great

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 82.

pedagogical innovation in Europe as well as in the States, and American school reformers became variously entranced with new European methodologies like the Lancasterian monitorial system, Pestalozzian moral discipline, and the Prussian graded school. None of these systems—with the important exception of the graded school—proved long lasting, but behind each pedagogical fad nevertheless lay an earnest desire to find a mechanism by which students might be more powerfully motivated to attend to their work more assiduously. Whether by giving students the freedom to progress at their own pace, enticing them with the reward of progress to higher grade levels, or subjecting them to socializing routines of normalized conformity, 19<sup>th</sup> century pedagogical styles cleared divergent paths that all led to the shared goal of promoting individual dedication to work.<sup>104</sup> Students were taught through various mechanisms of reward and punishment to complete tasks as assigned by their monitors, to shut out external and internal distractions or temptations, and to persevere in tasks that offered little pleasure other than the eventual approval of their superiors.

In pursuit of the same moral goal of promoting industriousness, many Common School advocates also devoted a considerable amount of their energies to the investigation of the ideal layout of the classroom and structure of the school building. This architectural inquiry might on the surface appear to be a strange side venture for men like Horace Mann, John Pierce, and Henry Barnard, who were engaged day by day in the managerial tasks of evaluating teachers, approving curricula, and pleading for increased funds from miserly legislative bodies, but the design of new classrooms was in these men's minds integral to achieving the ultimate goals of their educational enterprise. Details as minute as the placement of windows, the circulation of air in the room, the curvature of chair backs, and the orientation of desks in the classroom all contributed to the overall pedagogical effect of encouraging children to remain at their work, undistracted by physical discomfort or outside commotion. If a schoolroom is improperly constructed, ventilated, and furnished, Henry Barnard argued, "nothing but

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<sup>104</sup> For a helpful account of one such pedagogical fad of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century—the Lancasterian system—see *Ibid.*, 40–44.

the fear of punishment, or its frequent application, can keep a live child still under such circumstances, and even that, cannot do it long.”<sup>105</sup> Every detail of the school’s design, from administration and curriculum to discipline and architecture, was reoriented and reformed to better serve the cause of promoting individual productivity and, by extension, national wealth.

Through these three vectors of school reform—centralization of school administration, curricular coordination with industry, and a disciplinary inculcation of industriousness—the economic deployment of the school pieced together a forceful program for public education that would at last unite the diverse educational programs of early America into a more coherent system of common schooling. The economic rationality that underwrote this process of educational unification, however, was founded upon a not uncontroversial vision of the nation’s collective existence as a matter primarily of economic production and the circulation of the vices of sloth and criminality that threatened production. This vision of national unity was of course not the only model of public life present in the public discourse of the time, and the expansion of the economic educational model across the states of the Northeast was not unanimously celebrated as an ameliorative advance in the consolidation of the republic. Earlier claims concerning the import of local autonomy, cultural reproduction, and democratic self-governance continued to haunt the educational debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although these alternative goals of educational development were marginalized, they were never entirely forgotten by communities of cultural dissenters and workers’ groups actively contesting the regime of economic character formation. It is to the scattered forms of dissent against the Common School model that I would finally like to turn in order to better measure the social and political costs of the economic deployment.

#### *§4.1 Educational Dissent and the Common School*

The question that haunted the educational writings of the American Founders, I have argued, was

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<sup>105</sup> Barnard, *Report on the Public Schools of Rhode Island*, 182.

the question of what type of collective body public schools ought to produce, reproduce, or manage. In their own time, this question of the Founders would go unanswered as long as the mass of the citizenry did not feel compelled to conceive of a collective existence beyond traditional ties of family, church, and community. By the onset of the Civil War, however, this lingering question had received a definite answer, first in the emergence of a governmental analysis of the national population as a unified productive body, and second in the evangelical spread of a Common School movement that sought to treat that collective national body. The collective existence the Common School was designed to serve, however, was not a public united in the first instance by a common political project of self-governance; preceding the self-constituting republic formed by a common right, governmental administrators perceived a more fundamental unity of a population constituted by the natural circulations of disease, vice, wealth, and virtue. All citizens of the state are susceptible to infection by the virus of vice and idleness, their reasoning indicated, and infection by this virus undermines the capacity for the nation to provide for its own material needs. It is in this sense of a common vulnerability to the free circulation of vice and the pains caused by vice, therefore, that the various groups of the pluralist state would be united together as a single population subject to the ministrations of pedagogical experts.

At the core of this governmental project of the school stood the ideal figure of the productive, industrious individual, both the agent of his own economic destiny and the efficient engine of the national economy. The expanding institution of the Common School was aimed at forming precisely such characters out of the dissolute material of the American population, subjecting children of all backgrounds to a regime of moral education that would inculcate in them the disposition of industrious production and a reward-centered appetite for material success. As the Common School's most prominent advocates presented their case, this curriculum of character reformation and preparation for future employment was a boon both to the individual child as well as to the economic and moral health of the population as a whole. Not all portions of the American population, however, readily accepted

the authority of a program of public education that would subject their children to an externally designed regimen of moral training, endowing them a particular set of habits and dispositions deemed useful for individual and collective success. As governments in Northeastern states like Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania began to apply increasing degrees of state power to accomplish the administrative goals of educational centralization, school reformers quickly found that their vision of a culturally ecumenical, politically benign, and economically productive institution was not shared by all segments of the population. Although they may not have shared a common platform in their resistance to the Common School movement, German Protestants, Irish Catholics, independent small farmers, and democratic advocates of local control, among others, each advanced their own set of grievances against the centralization and expansion of the school. The resistance these groups presented may have been ill-fated historically, yet I believe their dissent helps to reveal in stark terms what alternative paths of development were closed off in the slow march forward of the governmental model of public education.

Few of these groups were opposed to the idea of publicly supported education as such; although individual citizens would frequently express discontent with the increased burden of taxation required for the establishment of new schools or for the abolition of school fees, no principled movement advocated the outright disestablishment of every extant form of public education. Instead, the most influential groups mobilizing against the centralization and homogenization of the schools were motivated by specific disagreements concerning the content and organization of the institution. Conflicts repeatedly arose independently in multiple states over what the school's language of instruction would be, which version of the Bible would be used, how qualified teachers should be selected, and how much control specific townships should have over the affairs of their schools. Much of the recent scholarship on Common School dissent, however, has focused primarily upon the resistance offered by one group in particular: the growing population of Roman Catholics in urban



centers like New York and Philadelphia. Catholics mobilized early against the establishment of tax-supported Common Schools, which they viewed as inherently sectarian and anti-Catholic, and insofar as Catholic educational separatism continues to influence policy debates today, their discontent is illustrative of at least one alternative model of educational development that has persisted in Americans' political imagination: the model of a primarily communal or cultural deployment of the school.

It was a central article of the Common School faith that the preservation of the nation and its republican institutions depended upon forging a common identity and moral character shared by the entire population, and the school was the most convenient tool for effecting this unity. As one author in Horace Mann's *Common School Journal* explained,

The children of this country, of whatever parentage, should, not wholly, but to a certain extent, be *educated together*,—be educated, not as Baptists, or Methodists, or Episcopalians, or Presbyterians; not as Roman Catholics or Protestants, still less as foreigners in language or spirit, but as Americans, as made of one blood and citizens of the same free country,—educated to be one harmonious people.<sup>106</sup>

School reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century consented that the goal of national civic unity ought not be accomplished at the expense of the liberty of conscience, yet they argued that these two principles were not necessarily in conflict. The basic curricular goals of establishing an industrious and moral character in the young children of the population, promoting obedience to secular authorities, and fostering patriotism stood distinct from sectarian differences concerning the interpretation of scripture, and Common School advocates believed these civic aims obliged all citizens to support public schools both with their tax dollars and with the attendance of their children. The brand of civic cohesion the governmental rationality of the school reformers recommended could not be fully realized so long as

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<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*, 54.

one segment of the population withheld participation.

In line with their commitment to providing a sound moral education for the nation's youth, Common School advocates by and large envisioned the school as a place where *religion* would be supported without any *denomination* or *sect* gaining the upper hand. On Horace Mann's telling, the neutrality of the school was one of the "moral beauties" of the Massachusetts system; the school was the "one place in the land where the children of all the different denominations are brought together for instruction, where the Bible is allowed to speak for itself."<sup>107</sup> The Catholic hierarchy, however, disagreed with the school advocates in their assertion that this goal of religious neutrality could be attained without infringing upon their particular vision of the education required for spiritual salvation. Already in his dream of bringing together the children of all sects and of presenting the Bible without interpretive assistance, for example, Mann had run afoul of the Catholic requirements for proper spiritual direction. The Scriptures, according to Catholic doctrine, were texts that imparted their moral wisdom only obscurely, and without the guidance of clerical authority they might become a source of confusion for the still impressionable character of a young child: "The Catholic apprehend danger from the uncommented and indiscriminate reading of the Bible."<sup>108</sup> By allowing children to read the Scriptures and "judge for themselves," one Catholic author complained, "the Protestant principle is therefore acted upon, and slyly inculcated, and the schools are Sectarian."<sup>109</sup>

The conflict between a religiously ecumenical school system and the Catholic prescription for a pious upbringing, however, stretched beyond the question of whether independent reading of the Bible ought to be allowed. Bishop John Hughes, one of the most vocal critics of New York's public school movement, offered a laundry list of complaints in an 1840 speech:

The cold indifference with which it is required that all religions shall be treated in those schools—

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<sup>107</sup> Mann, "Report for 1848," 744.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*, 70.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 69.

the Scriptures without note or comment—the selection of passages, as reading lessons, from Protestants and prejudiced authors, on points in which our creed is supposed to be involved—the comments of the teacher, of which the commissioners cannot be cognizant—the school libraries, stuffed with sectarian works against us—form against our religion a combination of influences prejudicial to our religion, and to whose action it would be criminal in us to expose our children at such an age.<sup>110</sup>

The very fact that the schools would bring together children of different backgrounds, insofar as this arrangement would expose young Catholics to heterodox teachers, classmates, and books, opened the door to a variety of moral dangers that the Church viewed as antagonistic to their community of faith. On these grounds, Bishop Hughes submitted that the neutrality of influence sought after by the school reformers was impossible, and he proclaimed himself “unwilling to pay taxes for the purpose of destroying our religion in the minds of our children.” The pious moral character demanded by Catholic doctrine depended upon the establishment of a separate system of instruction in which “the three great educational agencies” of home, Church, and school would be seamlessly woven together.<sup>111</sup>

Contemporary critics like Stephen Macedo and Diane Ravitch have seen in Catholics objections to the Common School a foreshadowing of the reactionary illiberalism that has characterized some of the most radical religious resistance to American secular political culture, and indeed many of the values appealed to by the Catholic hierarchy of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century appear antithetical to contemporary liberal ideals of freedom of thought, personal autonomy, and civic tolerance.<sup>112</sup> By establishing an alternative educational system that could effectively deny the existence of heterodox opinions and subject the formation of individual character to an unquestioned voice of religious authority, such critics argue, the Catholic Church isolated its moral culture from the developing national conversation.

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<sup>110</sup> Hughes, “Speech of Bishop Hughes,” 15.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*, 76; Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

Bishop Hughes' uncompromising vision of the Church's pervasive role of spiritual direction, however, perhaps stands at the extreme end of a more widespread reaction to the expanding influence of the Common School that manifested itself in less authoritarian forms in multiple confessional communities. David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot have identified a general fault line in 19<sup>th</sup> century American religious culture that nicely helps explain differing attitudes towards the expansion of the Common School. On one side of the fault line stood the mainline Protestant denominations—Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists. These “pietists,” as Tyack and Hansot label them, shared a radically individualist belief in the independence of individual conscience and character, and they saw the progressive improvement of society taking place by providing individuals with the tools necessary to care for themselves. “Contained in the religious ideology,” Tyack and Hansot write, “was a vision of an ideal political economy,”—a political economy of personal advancement that “enabled employers to deny an older Christian ideal of communal interdependence.”<sup>113</sup> In contrast to this group stood the minority “liturgical” faiths—Roman Catholics and Lutherans most notably included—who maintained a close attachment to the older ideal of “communal interdependence.” In the extreme version of liturgical faith articulated by Bishop Hughes of New York, individual conscience is potentially effaced under the authority of the Church. In its milder variants, however, the liturgical orientation took exception to the possessively individualist, economically minded implications of the Common School without denying the legitimacy of the enterprise of common schooling as such. Such groups as the German Lutherans in the Midwest objected to the school's attempt to cultivate character outside of a rooted community, but they did not demand the right to educate entirely in isolation.

Both the Catholic and Lutheran grievances against the Common School hearken back to older educational arrangements that held firm in the first two centuries of schooling in America. These “liturgical” faiths saw in the creation of a public, secular, and individualist educational institution a

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<sup>113</sup> Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*, 74.

dangerous subtraction of the individual child from the dense network of associations—religious, familial, and communal—that they believed supported good character and personal fulfillment. In this fundamental belief in the necessary entanglement of community and character, 19<sup>th</sup> century dissenters closely echoed the call issued by Christopher Sauer to the Pennsylvania Germans a century earlier to resist the establishment of Anglican charity schools in their towns. Like Sauer, the liturgical believers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw in the rise of the Common School a new, primarily economic or individualistic mode of sociality that threatened to erode the influence of religion and culture upon community and character.

This socially conservative, communally oriented opposition to the expansion of the school, however, was not the only form of resistance that the governmental reformers of the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century encountered. The Common School, after all, had to overcome not just the traditional communal deployment of the school on its path to acceptance; it also had to confront the long simmering republican ideals of an educational system designed for self-governance and participatory citizenship.

Common School advocates were of course no strangers to the rhetoric of republicanism and democratic equality. Although I have emphasized the medico-economic rationality that underwrote the governmental expansion of the school—a rationality that inserted the school into the circulations of poverty, vice, and disease as a moral corrective—the reform movement also made frequent appeal to the notion that a republican form of government, more than any other, depended for its stability and success upon the intelligence and virtue of the citizenry. The citizen must not only be knowledgeable and self-responsible, but he must also be imbued with a sociable disposition that attunes him to the needs of his country. In Mann's words,

Above all others, must the children of a republic be fitted for society as for themselves. As each citizen is to participate in the power of governing others, it is an essential preliminary that he should be imbued with a feeling for the wants, and a sense of the rights, of those whom he is to

govern...each individual must think of the welfare of the State, as well as the welfare of his own family, and, therefore, of the children of others as well as his own.<sup>114</sup>

The key attribute of the republican citizen, statements such as the above seem to indicate, is his sensitivity to the rights, desires, and welfare of his fellow citizens, and in this way republican virtue takes its place in the curriculum as an offshoot of a more general commitment to Christian charity. This moral solicitude for the wellbeing of others, it should be noted, stands in indirect conflict with other central elements of the Common School's program of character formation, particularly its emphasis on the virtues of industry and self-advancement. Perhaps sensing the potential obstacles to republicanism that the purely "industrious" character might create, Mann raises the question, "Knowing, as we do, that the foundations of national greatness can be laid only in the industry, the integrity, and the spiritual elevation of the people, are we equally sure that our schools are forming the character of the rising generation upon the everlasting principles of duty and humanity?"<sup>115</sup> This question remained an unresolved conflict in Mann's pedagogical system—how could the school promote the public spirit necessary for citizenship at the same time that it encouraged the self-interested reward motivations that supported habits of industry and production? Arguably, it was the goal of increased productivity and industry, highlighted in the economic deployment of the school, that superseded the goals of public spiritedness in Mann's educational policy.

Mann's frequent statements of republican commitment notwithstanding, critics in the Massachusetts legislature were accordingly suspicious of whether the reforms Mann advanced through his position as Secretary of the State Board of Education supported or undermined the capacity of the citizenry for self-governance. One short year into his tenure as Secretary, electoral winds shifted against Mann as the Whigs found themselves out of power and a Democratic governor took office. In his inaugural address, the new governor made it a priority of his administration to abolish the Board of

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<sup>114</sup> Mann, "Report for 1845," 422.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Education, and a House committee, headed up by Allen Dodge, announced in 1840 its support of the governor's intent. Although Mann's agency escaped defeat in the final vote, the accusations of the 1840 committee offer telling insight into the contested ground of what precisely republicanism required of educational institutions.<sup>116</sup>

The primary target of the committee's investigation, as expressed in Dodge's report, was the Board's emulation of certain strategies of bureaucratic centralization that Mann and his allies had consciously adapted from their observations of contemporary French and Prussian systems. The European systems, Dodge explained, "have a central Board, which supplies the ignorance and incapacity of the administrators of local affairs, and which models the schools of France and Prussia all upon one plan, as uniform and exact as the discipline of an army."<sup>117</sup> Although the Massachusetts Board technically only held the power to recommend reforms, and although the ultimate power of decision in school affairs still rested with the local districts, Mann had followed the European models in order to extend the influence of pedagogical experts in at least two ways. First, he had secured funds—half private and half public—for the establishment of two normal schools regulating teacher training throughout the Commonwealth; second, the Board had entered into a project of establishing school libraries in every district, each of which was to be stocked with books selected by administrators at the state level. Not without a degree of hysteria, perhaps, Dodge's report hinted ominously at the autocratic tendencies these and other like reforms revealed.

The establishment of the Board of Education seems to be the commencement of a system of centralization and of monopoly of power in a few hands, contrary, in every respect, to the true spirit of our democratical institutions; and which, unless speedily checked, may lead to unlooked-for and dangerous results.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*, 32–33.

<sup>117</sup> Dodge, "Report of the Committee on Education," 226.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

In opposition to these “dangerous” trends of “centralization,” Dodge offers a paean to the New England tradition of local democratic regulation of municipal affairs. Citing the then-recent writings of De Tocqueville on America, Dodge notes that it is the public spirit of participation in America, fed by the relative autonomy of local government from centralized authority, that constantly drives the improvement of American institutions in the face of changing circumstances.

This system of local authority is as beneficial to the schools, as to anything else. It interests a vast number of people in their welfare, whose zeal and activity, if they find themselves likely to be overshadowed by the controlling power of a central Board, will be apt to grow faint.<sup>119</sup>

Regardless of the content of the Common School’s curriculum, whether it be republican or authoritarian, the very fact of the institution’s emerging bureaucratic organization, Dodge asserts, belied its stated aims of bolstering republican governance.

This republican critique, however, did not always limit its scope to the organizational aspects of the school reform movement. Even if Dodge’s investigation did not venture far into the curricular details of Mann’s movement, other Massachusetts observers could not pass over the contrast between the Common School’s supposed democratizing influences and the anemic political virtues enshrined in its curriculum without criticism. Orestes Brownson, the Boston transcendentalist, acerbically summarized the deficiencies of the centralized system in an 1839 article that accused the Massachusetts Board of Education of converting the schools into “a branch of general police” and teachers into “a better sort of constables.”

The Board would promote education, they would even make it universal, because they esteem it the most effectual means possible of checking pauperism and crime, and making the rich secure in their possessions. Education has, therefore, a certain utility which may be told in solid cash saved to the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



Commonwealth.<sup>120</sup>

Brownson understood the type of school advocated by the Board to be a destructive institution insofar as it severed the child from the life of his community, squashing the natural interest the child might have in his town's affairs. In place of the original participatory political impulses felt by a child brought up to take part in the affairs of his democratic locality, the Common School would substitute a passively obedient political disposition, designed merely to secure commerce and prevent crime. While the certified teachers graduated from Mann's normal schools thus might teach students "to respect and preserve what is," and to beware "the dangers of anarchy," rarely would they "seek to imbue [students] with a love of liberty, to admonish them to resist the first encroachments of tyranny, to stand fast in their freedom, and to feel always that it is nobler to die, nay, nobler to kill, than to live a slave."<sup>121</sup> These latter lessons, in Brownson's high rhetoric, are essential to the preservation of democracy, and without a citizenry thus educated in the arts and sentiments of self-governance, no community would prove capable of maintaining itself in the face of a hostile world.

## §5 Conclusion

By the 1860s, the basic administrative structures and pedagogical purposes that would determine the future of American public schooling had already been established by the model programs in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the old northwest.<sup>122</sup> Tax-supported educational institutions, open to all citizens and free of charge, were the norm in the northern tier of the country; compulsory attendance laws, already under experimentation in Massachusetts, would soon spread to most other states in the Union; and state boards of education, normal schools for teacher-training, and bureaucratic systems for the regulation of standards were likewise emerging as mandatory elements in each state's educational

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<sup>120</sup> Brownson, "Education of the People," 412.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 411–412.

<sup>122</sup> Katz, "From Voluntarism to Bureaucracy in American Education."

apparatus. Behind each of these organizational innovations, furthermore, there existed a striking uniformity of purpose. This unparalleled phase of educational expansion was underwritten by a widespread public commitment to the idea that the public school was a mechanism for simultaneously improving individual and national productivity. Whatever social background an individual might be born into, the school would provide him with the intellectual tools and moral disposition to rise above his condition and attain whatever degree of success his ambitions and desires dictated. The school served to level the unequal advantages of birth and provide equal opportunities for success to all individuals who applied themselves to its lessons. At the level of society's collective wellbeing, the school once again would pay dividends exponentially greater than the small sum of tax dollars required to support it; tax-paying citizens could expect a reduction in crime, a decrease in social discontent, an increase in productivity, and a continual rise in national wealth. This basic blueprint of the public school, by the 1860s, had already settled into place as a pillar of American democracy, and it is precisely this blueprint that today's educational reformers reference when they call for a "back to basics" approach to reorganizing the school.

I have in this chapter, however, argued that the apparent consensus surrounding the aims and methods of the school has not been achieved without a cost. Despite the claims made on behalf of the institution, I have attempted to demonstrate that the school exerts an inculturating influence upon individual character that is something more than today's reformers would allow. The school is unalterably an agency of governmental character formation, shaping and channeling the activities of the individual citizen down certain well-worn paths cleared by pedagogues and administrators, while simultaneously foreclosing other developmental paths. From its initial deployment within the homogeneous religious communities of colonial Massachusetts to its 19<sup>th</sup> century application in the urban milieu of the industrial northeast, the school has always served to produce some particular, contentious form of subjectivity and sociality deemed socially necessary by its administrators. The

economically industrious character endorsed in American educational policy over the past 200 years, although it might meet with a high degree of social approval, can no more lay claim to social or cultural neutrality than the Puritans' ideal of the perfectly pious and obedient subject. It is an idiosyncratic and politically contestable form of subjectivity that our schools produce at the obvious expense of not encouraging other dispositions of communal interdependence or republican self-governance.

The developmental trajectory of the school, fitful and indirect as it has been, thus demonstrates clearly that a choice has been made concerning what type of individuality, and in turn what type of collectivity, the circumstances of American public life require. From a multiplicity of possibilities ranging from religious communalism to civic republicanism, the public schools have consolidated around a model of social organization that is at heart economic. On this model, it is the circulation of wealth, and the counter-circulation of poverty and criminal vice, that constitutes the collective existence of the population, and the school ministers to this population by instilling in its subjects habits of economic productivity, self-advancement, and self-maintenance.

Not all members of the American public, however, have consented to this economic vision of social life or to the governmental technologies that support it. Indeed, at every step of the school's development, alternative models of the socius have stood in the wings, with dissident groups constantly lobbying for a renewed chance to reshape educational institutions in a different image. I have emphasized two particularly influential alternative models in the foregoing historical account, one which appeals to the morally robust ties of the close-knit community and one which hearkens instead to a model of republican political participation. Both of these social ideals have been sidelined over the past two centuries by the momentum of a governmental apparatus tending to the economic wellbeing of the population. Dissent, discontent, and disagreement, however, are the perpetual products of continuing public experience under dynamic social circumstances. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, changing economic realities assisted in the consolidation of the medico-economic administration of society, and again today multiple

forms of discontent converge to question the responsiveness of this form of governance to current social experience. Might the school be altered yet again, perhaps by returning to serve the needs of traditionally organized communities of faith and ethnicity? Or ought we reinvest our educational energies in the civic resources of political participation?

Rather than continuing to deny the inevitable influence the institution of the school exercises upon individual character, social organization, and political contest, I contend that we must reevaluate the efficacy of these various models of schooling in order to make education more responsive to the needs of the present. It is to that task that I will now turn.

## Chapter 2

### The Claims of Community in Contemporary Educational Theory

#### §1 The Resurgence of Community

As I have argued in the preceding chapter, one of the earliest social functions of American schools was the reproduction of culturally unified communities. From the first educational projects of colonial Massachusetts, the school was understood by many as an agency of communal consolidation, designed to fend off the disintegrating forces of material and moral degradation that always lurk just outside of the community's physical and social boundaries. Communalism of a defensively parochial nature was the dominant organizational force in American education well into the nineteenth century, but for the past century and a half this early communal deployment of the school has been largely eroded by the forces of economic modernization and social integration. Republican nationalism, on the one hand, and economic nationalism, on the other, both emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as alternative theories of social life that could cope with the new demographic and economic realities of the day, conceiving of the nation as a trans-communal body knit together by shared problems of defense, civil peace, self-governance, and economic productivity. In both of these forms of social analysis, the communal model of the school would necessarily have to be altered to break down the parochial boundaries of sectarianism and agrarianism that prevented the full development of the nation's political or economic potentials, and in fact, over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the communal school was by and large disassembled and reconstructed as an institution for the preparation of productive members of industrial society rather than the consolidation of cultural communities. By the

turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the old model of the school as an agency of communal consolidation and cultural reproduction had all but disappeared in the face of a broadly economic public school paradigm that viewed state-supported education first and foremost as an instrument of individual capacity-building and national economic growth.<sup>123</sup>

Against this background of the slow disassembly of the robust communal ideal in education, as well as in other realms of American life, one of the most striking transformations of domestic politics around the turn of the twenty-first century has been the slow but steady reemergence of communalism—that is, of a community-centered critique of contemporary social life that revives some of the central values of older forms of parochialism. While the dominant governmental discourse today still justifies educational policy largely by reference to the ideals of national economic competitiveness, employment potential, and individual capacity building, an alternative, critical discourse, developing since the 1980s, has called into question the efficacy and supposed neutrality of these economically individualist policy aims. Modern communitarian critics like Amitai Etzioni, Charles Taylor, and William Galston have sought to place at least partial responsibility for a wide variety of contemporary social problems—from rapacious consumerism and social alienation to rising rates of drug-addiction and teen pregnancy—at the feet of modern governmental structures that remove children from cultural networks of socialization and develop the economic liberties and capacities of the individual subject at the expense of communal forms of social relations essential to human life.<sup>124</sup> Traditionally, these writers assert, culturally unified communities have provided a stable social context that encourages the formation of individual moral virtue and collective responsibility, but the modern liberal state, through institutions like the economically deployed public school, abstracts individuals from their robust communal context and leaves them with a relatively thin normative basis upon which to determine their life priorities, with

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<sup>123</sup> Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*; Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*; Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism*.

<sup>124</sup> Etzioni and Baris, “A Communitarian Perspective on Sex and Sexuality”; Taylor, “Legitimation Crisis?”; Galston, “A Liberal-Democratic Case for the Two-Parent Family.”

disastrous effects for society at large.<sup>125</sup>

Community, then, reemerges within this critical discourse as a mode of social organization essential to the health, happiness, and harmony of society, but which has nevertheless been neglected, if not outright effaced, by the supposedly benign social interventions of an economically individualistic governmental apparatus. Unsurprisingly, communitarian critics have again turned to the school in search both of the causes and potential remedies of the rootlessness and anomie of contemporary life. If many of the myriad social dysfunctions of modern life can be traced back to the collapse of communal relationships of mutual responsibility and traditional practices of moral education, then it stands to reason that the reintegration of the schools back into the ethical life of local communities, or the infusion of traditional religious and cultural values back into the curriculum would be necessary correctives to the excessive interventions of liberal governance. Religious schools, as educational institutions organized around communities of common purpose, serve for many as indicators of the necessary path ahead for America's public schools.<sup>126</sup> Insofar as such institutions reinvest parents in the education of their children, reinvest families into the life of their communities, and reinvest communities in the character of their members, the community-centered school serves a restorative function both for urban neighborhoods blighted by generations of poverty as well as for the suburban milieu defined by anomie and unbridled acquisitiveness. Educational parochialism returns with a vengeance, but now it is billed as something more than a consolation prize for dissident communities desirous to maintain their cultural heritage; it is advertised as an essential solution to social problems affecting all.

There is much to admire in the communitarians' critique of modern education, I believe, especially

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<sup>125</sup> Burt, "Religious Parents, Secular Schools: A Liberal Defense of an Illiberal Education"; Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*.

<sup>126</sup> James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).; Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

in their vigorous assault on the liberal shibboleth of state neutrality in education. As I have argued earlier, the organization, curriculum, and methods of common schooling in the United States foster a particular form of economically productive, self-accountable subjectivity that retains no title to the claim of cultural neutrality; the school is underwritten by a historically idiosyncratic conception of individuality and sociality that has in fact been subject to sustained controversy and dissent since its earliest implementation. But does this insightful critique of the state's non-neutral educational influence upon society demand a return to an older educational ideal of communal consolidation? Does the right of educational initiative automatically revert to the power of communities—however loosely conceived—if no culturally or politically neutral ground can be found for pedagogical authority to stand upon? I believe not, and as I intend to argue in the subsequent, the various communitarian educational reforms that have cropped up over the past three decades flirt dangerously with a naturalized ideal of the community as a beneficent agent of social harmony and moral improvement. Despite the rhetorical dichotomy so frequently deployed between the supposedly natural harmony of the self-sustaining community and the artificial discord caused by governmental interference, recent attempts to privatize and moralize educational institutions, as well as to cultivate in students culturally insular identities, have demonstrated that the recreation of a community-centered educational institution is just as much an artifact of governmental policy as the liberal ideal of individual educational autonomy that they seek to overturn.<sup>127</sup>

If communitarians wish to effect a wholesale reform of American educational institutions according to an old ideal of parish and community, an appeal to the natural rights of parents or the dictates of tradition is insufficient; the burden is on the communitarian project to demonstrate that the revived educational rationality of community consolidation is indeed, as it is claimed, responsive to the social and political challenges of the present. Unfortunately, I believe that when examined through this

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<sup>127</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 167–196.



pragmatic lens, the community-centered ideal of the school potentially produces at least as many problems as it resolves. The reconstruction of the school under older parochial ideals of communal unity and character education might address certain widespread dissatisfactions with contemporary educational practice—the withering of children’s sense of cultural identity; the discouragement of parental involvement in education; etc.—but it does so by retreating into static, potentially stagnant forms of social relationship. These static forms of sociality are dangerous, on my account, because they discourage individuals from engaging in the broader public conversation concerning shared, *trans*-communal social problems—problems like cultural intolerance, economic stratification, and technocratic governance that threaten the existence of individual communities and the broader *socius* alike. Rather than providing all subjects with the tools needed to recognize and confront the dynamic set of social problems that beset complex, pluralist societies, the reconstructed school might lock children into the sinking ship of a community disengaged from larger social trends. When the cultivation of “community” and “character” occurs at the expense of the development of certain markedly *political* capacities in the citizenry—those habits of public debate and inquiry into matters of common concern that enable democracies to cope with emergent social problems—then the resultant polity is left ill-equipped to defend and reproduce itself into the future.

## **§2 Community and Society**

I want to take a step back, however, to consider more closely the conception of community that underwrites some of these recent innovations in educational policy and school administration, for many of the central disagreements I have sketched out thus far hinge on what precisely is meant by ambiguous terms like “community,” “society,” and “public.” The forms of parochial dissent that I have described in the previous chapter were motivated out of the desire of particular communities to maintain their traditional way of religious or cultural life, and thus school dissent remained indebted to

the idiosyncratic conceptions of community valorized by particular dissenting groups—whether it be a religious ideal of collective salvation or a separatist model of linguistic and culture distinctiveness. The more recent communitarian critique of public education, however, rests not on any particular community’s self-understanding, but rather on a generalized understanding of how familial, cultural, and other collectivizing relationships are fundamental to the development of human sociality as such. The idea of “community” as an organizing concept of educational practice thus becomes disconnected from the comprehensive doctrines of particular groups, and it functions instead as a sociological category that picks out certain relationships reputedly fundamental to the lives of all individuals, whatever their particular ethnic or religious context might be.

As an initial heuristic, the well-worn sociological distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* captures with reasonable precision the distinction between “community” and “society” that motivates the communitarian critique (I shall set the problem of the “public” to one side for the time being).<sup>128</sup> In a general sense, communitarians lament the collapse of communal modes of life (*Gemeinschaften*) in which members understand their individual identities first and foremost as products of interactive relationships and collectively held goals. Those relationships that are defined by religious communion, kinship, and the sharing of traditional cultural mores are ready examples of this technical sense of “community” insofar as they (a) organize their constituent members to abide by certain uncontested standards of rightness and (b) channel individuals’ activities towards achieving common goals. In an earlier era, these robustly normative relationships organized nearly all economic, aesthetic, political, and intimate activities an individual might undertake in her life, much as they still do for members of the dwindling number of non-capitalist, non-liberal communities remaining in the world.<sup>129</sup> In the experience of most modern individuals, however, certain individualizing political and economic trends

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<sup>128</sup> The *locus classicus* of the distinction is Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, chapter four of Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Also, Jonathan Lear’s interpretation of the communal life of the Crow in Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*.

have precipitated a slow disintegration of religious and cultural communities' monopoly on action-orientation. Individuals living in modernizing, pluralist societies have increasingly abandoned communal patterns of production, consumption, and cooperation in order to seek satisfaction of their needs and desires through purely instrumental associations instead. In such instrumentally organized societies (*Gesellschaften*), as opposed to normatively organized communities, independent, self-regarding individuals work together only insofar as their association is an efficient method of achieving goals that are defined personally and without reference to the worldviews of others.<sup>130</sup>

To take a starkly illustrative example of the differences between these two modes of collective organization, we might briefly reflect upon an example familiar to students of Marxist political theory: the drastic shifts in social life signaled by the enclosure of the commons in early modern England. The life of a peasant embedded in the traditional structures of the medieval English village was strictly regulated according to communally recognized patterns of production, allegiance, and interdependency. Religious belief, cultural ritual, and affective relationships formed an overlapping network of beliefs and social ties that reinforced customary social roles and interactions. Not only would the peasant's occupation be selected in advance for him by the traditional allocation of social roles, but he would also find himself born into an intricate economy of interpersonal duties and obligations, political allegiances, and religious and moral standards that established for him a socially recognized identity that would orient all the activities of his life. The very material survival of the peasant, in this way, was underwritten by social networks and interpersonal relationships that all community members could recognize as culturally appropriate. This complex web of beliefs, relationships, and institutions that defined the early modern community, furthermore, functioned as an *objective* element of social reality; the generalized, collective endorsement of the structures of communal life presented each individual

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<sup>130</sup> Tönnies develops these categories as "normal types"—logically, rather than empirically, distinct categories that in practice are separated by shades of gray.

with an identity and social role he was essentially powerless to alter in any meaningful sense.<sup>131</sup>

For an early modern peasant possessing such a communally secure—albeit restrictive—identity, the enclosure of the common lands, and the collapse of the village life dependent upon those lands, arrived as a sudden and immense cataclysm—a “great disembedding,” as Charles Taylor has called it.<sup>132</sup>

Stripped of access to collectively farmed land the communally guarded pastures needed to graze their livestock, the culturally and economically unified communities of early modern England were forced to look outside of the old village structure to satisfy their material needs, and they thus found themselves dispossessed of valuable intersubjective resources and relationships in addition to the material goods of the common pastures. As a result, a flood of disconnected peasants, forced to move outside of the sedimented patterns of the feudal community, descended upon English cities. The historical trajectory is of course well established: as both Karl Marx and Max Weber have argued, the European peasants who were gradually disembedded from their traditional communal lives through the process of enclosure in turn formed the basis for a new, proto-capitalist social order based upon wage labor rather than feudal production.<sup>133</sup> It is also, we might note, one of the causal forces responsible for the proliferation of separatist communal groups like the Puritans in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>134</sup>

Though the economic story is familiar, it is nevertheless worth pointing out further sociological implications of this great disembedding in order to clarify the distinction between the old, culturally organized community and the new, economically organized society. As opposed to the extensive set of duties, obligations, and allegiances written into the communal structures of the medieval and early modern village, the capitalist mode of production requires comparatively few bonds of common belief or duty be established between participants. While the capital-wage labor contract does of course

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<sup>131</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* Chapter 3.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>133</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>134</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*. Foucault’s account of course contributes the emergence of separatist communities to a number of other, non-economic factors, which a more complete description of this social shift would have to consider.

depend upon certain expectations of productivity and payment, the interpersonal ties between the parties to this contract do not extend far beyond this basic exchange agreement between self-interested individuals. The individual capitalist cares little what religion his laborers profess, what language they speak, what their family lives are like, what folk heroes they praise in their songs, etc., so long as the instrumental efficacy of their raw labor is not hindered by such extra-curricular factors. The capitalist factory owner, in this sense, bears little resemblance to the manorial lord, and the cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity of the industrial proletariat stands in stark contrast to the homogeneity of the feudal peasantry. In place of the patriarchy of the lord and the communal bonds of vassalage, modern capitalist society employs individuals in culturally non-specific relations of economic production. As Marx and Engel's memorable turn of phrase has it, "[The bourgeoisie] has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, callous 'cash payment.'"<sup>135</sup>

Depending upon one's political leanings, this historical shift in productive regimes and social relations might be viewed as an unequivocal act of liberation from feudal oppression, or as a ghastly loss of the sacred ties of faith and family. Alternately, following Marx, one might also advance a more nuanced thesis: the dissolution of traditional community by an economically arranged society merely represents a substitution of one form of exploitation, "veiled by religious and political illusions," by another form—"naked, direct, brutal exploitation."<sup>136</sup> Regardless of your political interpretation of the phenomenon, however—whether it is to be praised, decried, or cynically supported—the sociological story seems at least superficially clear: the feudal village, organized around a communally recognized order of norms, relationships and roles, gives way to a capitalist society in which individuals associate primarily for the instrumental purpose of providing for their basic animal needs.

The communitarian thesis I want to follow in this chapter, however, calls our attention to a slightly

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<sup>135</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 11.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

more complex connection that arguably holds between these two general types of collective existence. Despite the appearance of a gradual historical replacement of one form of social organization by another, communitarian theorists argue that the replacement of community by society has never been, and can in fact never be, a complete substitution. In the simplest of terms, society *depends* upon some form of community for its continued existence. That is, society—as a loose collection of individually oriented, normatively thin, instrumental associations—is *parasitic* upon community—understood as a culturally organized, normatively robust, ethically substantive association. While some romantic critics of social modernity view the collapse of community as an irretrievable loss of humanity, and while Marxist critics have tended to interpret capitalist development as one step forward in rendering communal ideology obsolete, communitarian theorists are interested in pointing out the strands of communal life within modern society that still precariously hold together our sense of identity, culture, and solidarity.<sup>137</sup> This theoretical relationship of dependency between society and community bears further scrutiny.

The communitarians' conceptual priority of community over society is of course a long-standing tenet of the *Gemeinschaft* sociological tradition. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century social theorist who popularized the communal/social distinction, Ferdinand Tönnies, defined these abstract sociological categories (what he called “normal types”) by way of a metaphorical opposition between the organic and the mechanical: “Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artefact.”<sup>138</sup> Tönnies' point here is a relatively simple one: a *Gesellschaft* association is a “mechanical aggregate” in the sense that it cannot generate its own motivating energies or formulate its own ends. It depends for its continued functioning upon the continuing assent and participation of its members, who must arrive at the association with their goals,

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<sup>137</sup> Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.

<sup>138</sup> Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, 19.

beliefs, and norms in hand. By contrast, a *Gemeinschaft* association—a community—reproduces its own membership, fosters reflection upon the proper ends its individual members ought to seek, and internally motivates its members to continue participating in support of those ends. If “society” is an instrumental association of individuals seeking independently defined ends, only a “community” possesses the orienting power needed to provide individuals with ends that they might then seek to accomplish through their broader social associations. Even the powerful mechanics of the internal combustion engine, to extend Tönnies’ analogy, depends upon the organic energies stored up in fossil fuels to run.

In more recent theoretical vernacular, we might also attempt to grasp this dependent relationship between society and community by thinking about the dynamics of individual *identity formation*, as communitarian theorist Charles Taylor has done in a wide-ranging series of philosophical and historical studies.<sup>139</sup> Adopting a broadly Hegelian framework, Taylor asserts that an individual’s self-understanding and substantive life goals depend in a fundamental sense upon a “dialogic” engagement with other individuals in her social surroundings. We cannot work out who we are or who we want to be monologically on our own, in isolation from all social criticisms and affirmations. In large part, this dependency on others exists because our actions, ideas, and thoughts occur so naturally or habitually that we do not even reflect upon the fact that our way of doing things is in fact just one way of doing things; we depend upon someone other than ourselves to give us an external perspective on our actions—to reflect a third-person image of ourselves back at us that we can evaluate and reflect upon in order to revise our life plans.

This reflective function of sociality is necessary for an individual to engage in conscious life planning or identity formation, but Taylor’s insight additionally points us towards an even deeper dependency between identity and community. After all, if intersubjective reflection makes it possible for an

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<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”; Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition.”

individual to evaluate and alter her social role, where do the standards that an individual can use to evaluate that reflected image of herself originate? Taylor, citing the work of social psychologist George Herbert Mead, argues that values themselves are communal in origin; the only standards of evaluation that an individual has access to in order to criticize and reconstruct her own life are necessarily the values that she has internalized from a surrounding community of expression. Mead's developmental theory of value internalization will be explored in greater detail later,<sup>140</sup> but the crucial point for the communitarian argument is relatively straightforward. In short, values, in Mead's analysis, are inescapably intersubjective in origin because values are in the first instance ideals of behavior attached to a particular social role. What it means to be a "good" pitcher in baseball, to take one of Mead's favorite spheres of reference, is entirely dependent upon first understanding the role of the pitcher, which in turn depends upon the mutually interlocking roles of batter, catcher, baseman, outfielder, etc. that every participant in the game recognizes. It makes little sense to try to define the excellence of the pitcher without reference to the expectations and roles held by every other member of the team, because a good pitcher is one who gives an exemplary performance of the functions that are socially recognized by the team as essential to the role of the pitcher, or again, a good pitcher is one who interacts with the other players on his team flawlessly according to the intersubjective norms that regulate the roles of the team. The values and norms associated with the role of the pitcher are thus born out of cooperative interactions amongst a group of individuals who rely upon one another to achieve a common goal—in short, they are born out of a community.<sup>141</sup>

Moving beyond the simplified baseball example, Taylor asserts that even the more complex ethical values and ideals that underwrite the rich diversity of adult identities—being a good friend, colleague, partner, or being honest, generous, fair—are all initially grounded in cooperative communal contexts in which evaluative terms of good and bad have mutually recognized social meaning dependent upon

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<sup>140</sup> See Chapter 5 below.

<sup>141</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, 152–164.



identifiable roles. The vocabulary of evaluative meanings that we utilize to define and reconstruct our identities over the course of a life constitutes a “language of expression,” and the only way to acquire such a language is first through residing in and interacting with normatively coherent communities that recognize and support interactive social roles. As Taylor explains, “We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression...but we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others.”<sup>142</sup> Even when as a fully formed adult, I pause to internally reflect upon my conception of myself, upon who I am, or upon who I want to become, I can only do so by utilizing the tools of language, by reflecting upon shared images of excellence provided for me through dialogue and interaction, and by imagining the positive and negative reactions any new course of action would provoke in an intersubjective, social world. All of these “tools” of identity formation, as it were, are *common* resources in the sense not only that they are a product of a social environment, but also in the stronger sense that they can only be *maintained* through associations in which humans conjointly express a vision of a flourishing human life.

Taylor’s neo-Hegelian reflections on identity formation prove decisive for the communitarian critique of modern society. On Taylor’s account, it is precisely the dialogical achievements of individual identity construction that the purely instrumental associations of modern society are incapable of replicating in full. Although instrumental associations are designed to enable an individual to attain particular goods that she has chosen in advance for herself, the individual’s act of choice depends upon a collectively secured identity that serves as “the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense.”<sup>143</sup> The process of socialization that enables an individual to choose her desired goods thus must occur in advance of joining an instrumental association, and it must occur in the context of a more ethically robust, normatively substantive association in which individuals

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 32.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

grapple in common with the question of what is truly valuable in a human life. “To define my identity is to define what I must be in contact with in order to function fully as a human agent, and specifically to be able to judge and discriminate and recognize what is really of worth or importance, both in general and for me.”<sup>144</sup> Identity is thus a *communally* secured dimension of our subjectivity that makes the individual’s future choice of goods within an instrumentally arranged society possible. Community, on these terms, is necessary for “the good life,” but does the modern school system recognize the indispensability of communal relations for the formation of fulfilling identities?

### **§3 Communities and Schools**

Although the communitarian impulse in contemporary criticism surfaces in a variety of seemingly disconnected domains of social experience, I believe we can locate the movement’s unifying impetus in the above insights drawn from Charles Taylor: the ethically robust ties of communal associations are essential for the coherent formation of an individual’s identity and, by extension, for the successful conduct of society at large. The dialogic interaction with other individuals who share a vocabulary of values and an understanding of interlocking social roles is what enables us to define our identities and our aspirations, and without such communal forms of association, individuals struggle to articulate fulfilling goals for themselves or to hew to a meaningful path through diverse social interactions. Vibrant, coherent communities accordingly supply a society with the ethical orientations and motivational goals that drive individuals forward into the social milieu with a sense of purpose and normative guidance.<sup>145</sup> These communal connections are especially important for the work of ethical socialization that occurs through childhood, but many communitarians argue that the modern school system interferes with—and even undermines—communal processes of identity development.

In the educational sphere, the outlines of how the communitarian credo applies are superficially

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<sup>144</sup> Taylor, “Legitimation Crisis?,” 258.

<sup>145</sup> Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 48–52.

obvious, even if the details prove complex upon closer examination. In the first instance, education is interpreted in the communitarian framework according to its historic role as a communal agency of cultural reproduction. As Michael Walzer describes, education in its most “direct and unmediated” forms, predominant in traditional societies, takes place within the family and the family’s immediate communal connections as a method of informal socialization into culturally recognized roles and practices; children learn cultural mores and roles simply by being incorporated into the everyday practice of those mores and roles.<sup>146</sup> Even in complex pluralist societies lacking the normative consensus of the traditional community, it is still these informal and ethically robust associations that continue to provide the backbone of ethical socialization that will prepare individuals for successful entry into the adult world. In modern liberal society, a portion of this work is still accomplished through the pre-modern communal entities of church and village, although to a far greater extent it is the micro-community of the family that performs the necessary work of ethical identity formation.<sup>147</sup> Both John Locke and John Stuart Mill, arch-individualists though they may have been, recognized in this vein that the rights-respecting, socially useful, autonomous individual of their respective political theories was largely an artifact of the family as a site of mutual aid and ethical socialization, and thus that the stability of the liberal state depended upon the relative autonomy of the family. It is the affectively unified association of the family, these writers argue, that first shows children the benefit of cooperative social relationships; and it is the ethical and cultural beliefs of the home that naturally first provide children with a scheme of values that will motivate their choices as adults. This close network of *Sittlich* familial relations provides a developmental service the state cannot, and perhaps should not attempt to, replace through its legal mechanisms.

As I have argued in the preceding chapter, however, it is precisely these traditional communal

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<sup>146</sup> Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, 198.

<sup>147</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*; Coleman, “Families and Schools,” 32.

educational arrangements that have eroded under the pressure of the growing economic deployment of the school over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One consequence of the modernization of industry and the pluralization of culture, to reiterate the narrative of the last chapter, has been to overtax the informal developmental relationships that hold between parents and children, or communities and families, precipitating the need for trans-communal mechanisms to adequately prepare children for participation in the culturally diverse and economically competitive modern order.<sup>148</sup> On the interpretation of educational sociologist James Coleman, the rise of the school—a formal, institutional solution to the problem of child development—can be viewed as a direct, if incomplete, response to the dissociative side effects of liberal socio-economic development. Coleman argues that as the primary locus of economic activity moved from the household to the external sites of factories or offices, children—particularly male children at first—could no longer rely upon the benefits of home apprenticeship or kinship patronage to clear a path for future employment.<sup>149</sup> As the raw number of hours of personal contact between parents and children declined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a trend that intensified in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as both parents entered the workforce, the ability of parents to supervise their children’s moral and professional socialization likewise declined. The costs of these fraying socialization processes accrues not just to the children themselves, but also to their families, to their neighborhoods, and to society at large through the rise of trans-communal problems of poverty, crime, unemployment, and general social anomie—thus prompting state authorities to experiment with institutional solutions such as the Common School.

Contemporary communitarians are quick to point out that there are undoubtedly some social aims that the formal, trans-communal institution of the school is perhaps better suited to achieve than earlier, informal arrangements of family and cultural group. Coleman notes, for example, that the public school system as it has developed in the US has well-positioned itself to promote social mobility and

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<sup>148</sup> See §4 of Chapter 1 above.

<sup>149</sup> Coleman, “Families and Schools,” 32–34.

educational equity, providing each child with a fair set of academic opportunities; even if actual working school systems have produced mixed results, at best, any return to purely informal arrangements would almost certainly be worse for the long term prospects of fostering equal opportunity. However, the institutional strategy of marshaling tax dollars to compensate for declining informal educational arrangements—in other words, the creation of a public school system—can never fully replace the socializing functions of familial and communal relationships, for the trans-communal school lacks the resource of intersubjective ethical recognition that make identity formation possible.

As an engineered, institutional solution to the developmental deficit crisis, the school invariably encounters certain hard limits when it comes to the specific ethical decisions that have to be made regarding the development of an individual's character, values, and aspirations. As even stringent liberal theorists of education for autonomy recognize, the long process of cultivating individual personality requires that one begin with a set of recognized moral convictions that are espoused and modeled within one's surrounding associations: "Membership in a community and embeddedness within a cultural and normative framework is a primary need of individuals—and an essential prerequisite for autonomy. One cannot act autonomously if one has no firm structure of beliefs on which to act."<sup>150</sup> Developmental processes of socialization and identity formation accordingly require that parents and educators, at least in the initial stages of a child's development, actively guide the child to adopt certain substantive ethical values. Even if the ethical identity of a person's childhood is only a "provisional identity" that she will later overturn in light of contradictory experiences, the child must begin from a concrete social location that will help to orient her ethical choices and evaluations into the future.<sup>151</sup> According to what substantive ethical doctrine, however, is a public school system in a diverse, pluralist society allowed to organize the process of character formation and moral education? The public school responds to the economic needs of society, but its clients do not come to the school

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<sup>150</sup> Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*, 56.

<sup>151</sup> MacMullen, "Education for Autonomy: The Role of Religious Elementary Schools," 602.

from a unified ethical background of communally recognized beliefs and ideals and cannot therefore be taught under the rubric of any one ethical or cultural system.

American curriculum designers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century forward have grappled with this problem by attempting to articulate an intellectually adequate, morally sensitive curriculum that would bridge the deep divisions of religion, ethnicity, class, and history that segment all pluralist societies.<sup>152</sup> One might hope that even the most radically diverse immigrant society would be able to find some common ground in advancing basic values of honesty, fairness, and mutual respect within the pedagogical relationship, but of course actual historical experience in curriculum formation casts doubt on the possibility of such a secular moral consensus ever solidifying. Indeed, the very idea of a secular curriculum has been provoked vociferous objections from many religious communities. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Catholic parents and educators roundly criticized the idea of the non-sectarian curriculum on the grounds that even the most non-controversial moral values—honesty, fairness, non-violence, etc.—when disconnected from their religious foundations, became tools for preaching the “sectarianism of infidelity.”<sup>153</sup> This religiously grounded complaint against the ideal of the consensus curriculum was again echoed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the numerous controversies that emerged around the issues of prayer in school, evolutionary science, and religiously affiliated student groups.<sup>154</sup> While non-religious parents have assiduously objected to the appearance of religious establishment in any guise within the schools, religious parents have found the secular curriculum equally objectionable for its exclusions rather than its inclusions.

The end result of these intractable disagreements concerning the moral curriculum of the school, according to the communitarian thesis, has been a general retreat and disengagement from the conscious task of ethical socialization within the public system. Although I believe this critical

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<sup>152</sup> For a detailed account of how the curriculum has sought to grapple with the problem of diversity, see Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* Section 1.

<sup>153</sup> Hughes, “Speech of Bishop Hughes,” 13–17.

<sup>154</sup> See, for examples, *Engel v. Vitale*, *Edwards v. Aguillard*, and *Westside School District v. Mergens*.

communitarian thesis fails to recognize that the modern school does participate in *some* forms of character construction—i.e., the rise of an intensely economic rationality teaches the virtues of the market—the argument does nevertheless call attention to the problematic ethical disconnection that arises between the school and the informal domains of home and community. Under threat of prosecution and public disapproval, teachers and administrators are reluctant to adopt any strong program of moral education, relegating the more substantive decisions regarding the formation of children’s character entirely to the parental sphere of authority. But can the work of ethical socialization be effective if the child spends more than half of each day under the supervision of a conflicting or at least non-reinforcing authority? Stephen Gilles argues that such a situation “places the strongest educational influences in the child’s life at cross purposes and sows confusion and discord rather than coherence and stability.”<sup>155</sup> In withdrawing from the work of moral education, the school does not thereby limit the impact of the school upon the child’s character; to the contrary, the stance of educational indifference might actively undermine the internalization of ethical ideals still maintained within remnant communal settings.

One popular outgrowth of this communitarian complaint has gained public traction through a critique of the “shopping mall high school,” the lampooned symbol of modern liberal society’s excessively individualistic, malignant influence on children’s moral development. Coined by educational scholars Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, the term “shopping mall high school” calls attention to the wide leeway given to individual students in today’s large urban and suburban high schools to construct their own personalized educational programs.<sup>156</sup> In their analysis of curricular trends in American high schools, Powell et al. argue that modern schools are increasingly organized to serve the individual student as a customer who possesses distinct and unassailable tastes and preferences in regards to his own academic progress. While the ancient tradition of *paideia* held that the role of the teacher or

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<sup>155</sup> Gilles, “On Educating Children: A Parentalist Manifesto,” 969.

<sup>156</sup> Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*.

counselor was to *shape* the child into an agent of intelligent choice, the shopping mall thesis holds that the proliferation of electives and extra-curriculars in today's schools seems to presuppose the individual's power of responsible choice in advance of a student's education.<sup>157</sup> Without a communally recognized ethical scheme of valuable career and life choices to organize the curriculum, teachers and administrators must concede authority to the choice of the child alone—failing, in the process, to provide any constructive guidance to the child's developing academic and career interests.

This deferential attitude of permissiveness is not limited to the academic domain, however, as schools have over the past half century also backed away from their traditional disciplinary authority in order to allow students more space to draw their own personal lessons from behavioral mistakes and to clarify their own personal scheme of values in light of their experiences. Gerald Grant, writing in the wake of the shopping mall thesis, argues that the pervasive failure to provide strong developmental direction to students is a naïve and unwise extension of a more general antipathy to authority prevalent in liberal societies. Citing an ACLU student manifesto from 1968, Grant laments the emergence of a “lawyerly” understanding of the educational relationship wherein students have a right “to act in ways which are predictably unwise” and wherein teachers who seek to prevent those actions are viewed as dictatorial moralizers who “impose” their values on students.<sup>158</sup> This radically individualistic understanding of the education paints all forms of authority with the same broad brush as unjust and intolerant forms of coercion, and it fails to distinguish between domination and indoctrination on the one hand, and, on the other, what Grant considers to be the beneficent educational authority of communally recognized values that aid youth in learning to exercise their freedom responsibly.

According to this communitarian critique of the shopping mall school, the one common value that appears to secure relatively widespread educational consensus, even under the social context of deep and divisive pluralism, is respect for diversity. And yet communitarian critics are quick to point out that

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<sup>157</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 2.

<sup>158</sup> Grant, *The World We Created at Hamilton High*, 51–53.



this value cannot ground any sort of coherent program of moral education on its own, for it establishes only a veneer of procedural comity within the school, contributing little to the substantive work of individual identity formation. As Powell et al. write,

High schools take few stands on what is educationally or morally important. Yet one thing they cannot be neutral about is diversity itself. Pluralism is celebrated as a supreme institutional virtue, and tolerating diversity is the moral glue that holds schools together. But tolerance further precludes schools' celebrating more focused notions of education or of character. "Community" has come to mean differences peacefully coexisting rather than people working together toward some serious end.<sup>159</sup>

Tolerance, respect for diversity, and a pluralist ethos might function as an important procedural ethic within the process of ethical development, but it cannot substitute for a substantive program that provides students with socially recognized identities, with a shared slate of commonly supported values, and with the orienting meanings of shared communal projects. If respect for diversity is not complemented by a commitment to one's own convictions, or the convictions of one's community, it becomes an empty, merely formalistic ethic of mutual isolation.

One crucial element of the modern deployment of the school that this communitarian critique arguably overlooks is the colonization of the school by a novel economic rationality in the absence of a more ethically robust curriculum. As I have argued in the previous chapter, it is true the modern school has increasingly been severed from traditional communal institutions of education like family and parish since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this severance has not precluded the cultivation of new virtues of the market or habits of the factory into successive generations of children.<sup>160</sup> The "shopping mall high school," in this light, is not simply characterized by a valorization of choice without guidance; the valorization of choice itself can be further criticized as an element in an economic rationality promoting active

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<sup>159</sup> Powell, Farrar and Cohen, *the Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Loser in the Educational Marketplace*, 3.

<sup>160</sup> See §5 of Chapter 1 above.

consumption in the free market.<sup>161</sup> Forms of self-interest, materialism, and competitiveness that benefit the economic growth of the nation are promoted at the expense of social cooperation and non-material satisfactions.<sup>162</sup>

Nevertheless, this neglect of the economic rationality of the school by some communitarian critics does not undermine their general thesis, for the emergence of economic socialization within the walls of the school does not substitute for or replace the thick moral functions of cultural or communal socialization.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, as Charles Taylor notes, in lieu of intersubjectively recognized sources of value and meaning, economically arranged associations can only offer the comparatively empty goals of instrumental accomplishment, domination over competition, or the fetishistic attainment of commodities; these economic priorities cannot take the place of communally secured ethical values in defining individual identity insofar as they are not substantive ends or goals for a life, but purely instrumental means useful for attaining some other substantive vision of a fulfilling life.<sup>164</sup> Whether we criticize the modern deployment of the school as merely passively neglectful in its refusal to shape individual identities, or whether we consider it actively complicit with an economic model of socialization, the basic plank of the communitarian critique remains sound: the modern school undermines the educational work of providing children with intersubjectively recognized values and norms essential to the development of their social identities.

This critical communitarian analysis of the school system's thin curriculum for ethical socialization provides a compelling reason to re-examine the goals and organization of contemporary education. If both the development of fulfilling individual identities and the ongoing life of society depend upon strong resources of ethical socialization, then the schools ought at the very least not undermine that important communal work. But under what responsibly communal rubric could the school be

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<sup>161</sup> Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* Chapter 4.

<sup>162</sup> Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*.

<sup>163</sup> I explore this difference in greater detail in Chapter 4 below.

<sup>164</sup> Taylor, "Legitimation Crisis?," 281; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 1, Chapter 5.

reconstructed to better provide for the ethical resources of identity? After all, the situation of social diversity and economically driven social disintegration that initially prompted the development of the centralized school system remains in effect today, and the problems that led to the demise of colonial communalism have not disappeared. A call to return to the parochialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century would arguably be nothing but unvarnished regressivism, fleeing the challenges of the present through a naively romantic return to the past. But what other communal models can communitarians offer? By tracing the contemporary problems of social anomie and communal disintegration back to the school, communitarian critics of public education prompt a thoroughgoing reorganization of educational methods and priorities, but I believe that a close examination of communitarian proposals for reform reveal the fatal inadequacy of their conception of community to confront the challenges of a contemporary pluralist society.

#### **§4 Problematizing Communal Education**

The modern public school system, which prides itself upon its cultural neutrality and its moral commitment to the intellectual cultivation of all children, arose in response to a historically particular situation of increasing diversity, economic modernization, and the slow dissolution of old modes of communal association, and insofar as this system has indeed opened limited opportunities for socio-economic mobility, and insofar as it has indeed promoted social cohesion, it has rightly earned the allegiance and support of the public at large. The thesis I have drawn from communitarian critics over the past section, however, has drawn our attention to some of the occluded costs of this system: the concerted effort by pedagogues and policy makers to scrub the public school system of any potential religious or cultural bias has not produced a neutral developmental institution that merely supports the intellectual development of all children. To the contrary, it seems that the institutions of public schooling that follow this course have potentially exercised a disintegrating effect on individual

personality, developing an anomic and atomized identity structure subject to the whims of the marketplace and disconnected from any strong cultural context of meaning.

If this critical thesis has merit, which I believe a rich literature of sociological critique and first person memoirs of educational alienation supports, the problem that confronts the communitarian project is the problem of how to respond to these contemporary crises.<sup>165</sup> Given the deep pluralism that characterizes modern liberal societies, what socializing principles or pedagogical methods can a diverse society draw upon to support the development of more ethically substantive identities in its nascent citizens? The communitarian arguments examined above would seem to indicate that effective individual identity development cannot take place without the orienting influence of some communally recognized ethical principles, supported within communal contexts and exemplified by particular role models. Insofar as a pluralist society such as America's has historically proven incapable of endorsing any one single comprehensive ethical framework for directing identity development, it might appear that the traditional sources of cultural authority—family, church, or community—ought to be the final arbiters of educational methods and content. Many communitarian writers have in fact followed their critique of contemporary institutions to this traditionalist conclusion, marshaling their socio-psychological understanding of individual identity development to support schemas of reform grounded in the authority of parents or of cultural traditions. I believe, however, that closer examination will reveal that such approaches are fundamentally unresponsive to the pluralistic social conditions of the present, and that their implementation would potentially exacerbate, rather than resolve, the problems of social anomie and communal disintegration.

The temptation to fall back upon naturalized notions of parental authority or cultural cohesion is strong when confronting the problems of contemporary education, and yet the complex situation of the

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<sup>165</sup> Work from a broad array of writers, I believe, supports this thesis. For non-communitarian sources of confirmation of this alienating or disorienting effect, see: Illich, *Deschooling Society*; hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*; Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of the School*.

school—located as it is at the intersections of individual, social, familial, and cultural development—demands that we search for an educational principle that can better respond to the pressing social problems of the present. Working through two prominent trends of communal educational reconstruction, one familial and one cultural, I believe that the insufficiency of communal model alone to organize education, and the need to turn to an alternative model of the public, becomes apparent.

#### *§4.2 Educational Reconstruction 1: Parental Authority*

Parental discontent with the educational status quo has of course been one of the centers of reform energies in American educational history, and it is thus understandable that a “parentalist” movement has produced a vigorous argument for bolstering the final educational authority of mothers and fathers. Indeed, there are perhaps numerous *prima facie* reasons for exploring familial relations as a valuable resource in bolstering the school’s capacities of ethical orientation, not the least of which is the strong historical tradition of home life serving as the center of a child’s education.<sup>166</sup> Additionally, parental advocates also proclaim that parents naturally take a greater interest in the development and care of their own individual children than might ever be expected from institutional or administrative authorities. As Stephen Gilles writes, “Parents have better incentives to act in their children’s perceived interests than do the state and its delegate, and will consequently be, on average, more faithful educational guardians.”<sup>167</sup> Sentimentally, we might describe this dedication to one’s own children and their future well being as a product of a natural familial bond of affection. More crassly, we might explain this intensity of interest by virtue of the significant investment of time and money that parents usually make in the growth and education of their children.<sup>168</sup> Either way, it seems at least initially plausible to respect the educational priorities of parents who disagree with the public curriculum. As

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<sup>166</sup> Coleman, “Families and Schools,” 32.

<sup>167</sup> Gilles, “On Educating Children: A Parentalist Manifesto,” 940.

<sup>168</sup> Galston, “A Liberal-Democratic Case for the Two-Parent Family,” 139–149.

Aristotle critically observed in relation to the scheme of extra-familial education proposed by Socrates in *The Republic*, “each man pays most attention to what is his own, but less attention to what is common,” and parents might thus be better positioned to provide for the needs of their children and give them the foundations for a solid ethical identity.<sup>169</sup>

Furthermore, the authority of parents to decide the course of their children’s education is a well-established principle in American Constitutional jurisprudence. In the long slide of educational burdens away from the home and towards state controlled institutions, the Supreme Court has on multiple occasions confirmed that parental authority can never be completely overcome by state interests. The landmark 1922 case of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, for example, established a bulwark preventing the states from mandating children’s enrollment in the public school system. Declaring that children are not “the mere creatures of the state,” the majority opinion in *Pierce* recognized a parental right to opt-out of the public system and entrust the education of their children to religious institutions or other private arrangements.<sup>170</sup> As long as children were provided with *some* form of education, for which the state retained the right to establish minimal standards, then parents were free to choose when and how their charges would be educated.

Contemporary parentalists, however, view the *Pierce* precedent as but a partial victory, for the principle established in that case and confirmed in its descendants allows wide latitude for public officials to shape the educational landscape in ways that constrain the choices of parents. *Pierce* upheld the legitimate right of the state to inspect and regulate private educational enterprises to guarantee that children were still equipped with the basic skills necessary to function as independent adult members of society and to ensure that the curriculum did not actively undermine the civil peace or the authority of the state. Even more problematically for public school dissenters, *Pierce* did not exempt those parents paying private school tuition from supporting the public system through their tax dollars.

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<sup>169</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 40.

<sup>170</sup> “*Pierce V. Society of Sisters*,” 501.

From the perspective of parents dissatisfied with the public curriculum, these reservations of state authority place undue burdens on those families with religious or cultural objections to the state system. If parents cannot afford the private school tuition that would enable them to provide their children with the moral development they believe is right and appropriate, then the tax burdens essentially mandate that students follow the public curriculum. Even if parents can afford private school tuition, state regulation again prevents parents from having complete authority over the content of the curriculum, driving a wedge yet again between home and school. These limitations imposed on parental authority by *Pierce* are thus purported to undermine the work of ethical socialization, preventing parents from “supply[ing] the child with the resources necessary to live a righteous life.”<sup>171</sup> Parental educational jurisdiction must be expanded, this line of thought proceeds, in order to ensure that all children can be raised in the strong ethical or cultural traditions of their parents and surrounding community.

The attempt to expand parental control over education and to efface, or at least further restrain, the authority of the state has advanced along several fronts in recent years, from school voucher experiments to parental permission initiatives that give parents veto power over curricular choices. Each of these courses of action represents an attempt on the part of dissenting parents to unsettle the current balance that courts and school administrators have struck between institutional and parental authority. In the most radical efforts, like those tested in the federal appellate case of *Mozert v. Hawkins County School Board*, parents have sought to overturn this balance entirely, asserting that parents alone must have ultimate authority to dictate the content of their children’s education. In the *Mozert* case, a coalition of fundamentalist Christian parents with children enrolled in public schools objected to the incidental content presented in a series of elementary readers designed to teach their children literacy. The *Mozert* parents cited a number of passages within the primers as objectionable

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<sup>171</sup> Burt, “Religious Parents, Secular Schools: A Liberal Defense of an Illiberal Education,” 63.

from the perspective of their religious beliefs; everything from the history of Catholic missions in New Mexico to fictional accounts of mental telepathy and stories of men cooking meals for women was deemed in contradiction to the truth as they believed the Bible declared it. Seeking to exempt their children from “all influences of evil that might lead them away from the way of God,” the *Mozert* parents claimed the right to veto any particular element of the public curriculum that they found objectionable; their petition asked that the school provide for alternative arrangements for their children that would preserve the purity of their religious development.<sup>172</sup>

At stake in this case—as well as in the various other curricular challenges that disgruntled parents have presented to teachers and principals on contentious issues of evolution, sex education, and controversial literature—is the question of whether the organization of the family ought to serve as the ultimate source of educational authority, overriding the claims of state-licensed pedagogical authorities on cultural or religious grounds. The communitarian critique of contemporary schools examined above would seem potentially to favor the demands of those parents who desire to inculcate in their children connections to a strong moral community and a culturally coherent model of identity over the claims of the state and its pedagogical experts, who primarily serve to introduce confusion into the nascent identities of children. The *Mozert* parents merely follow this communitarian principle to its furthest implication: if contemporary schools are to be faulted for disrupting the process of ethical socialization or introducing disunity into it, then in the interests of coherence in moral development there ought to be a singular authority given final jurisdiction or veto power over the beliefs and principles the child might be exposed to. Parents, given their ‘natural’ interest in the development of their child and their strategic advantage as coordinator of their children’s education, are the obvious candidates to assume this educational jurisdiction. Parents are the guardians and guarantors of ethical socialization, the argument goes, and they ought to be able to reject any developmental experience that undermines

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<sup>172</sup> “*Mozert V. Hawkins County School Board*,” 647.



their childrens' nascent cultural identities.

Here I submit that the one of the central inadequacies of the communal theory of socialization for educational application becomes most apparent: namely, the communitarian critique so highly prizes the benefits of consistent ethical socialization that it does not consider the need to balance those benefits against competing social interests in civil peace and social competency. If the goal of a communitarian intervention into the school system is simply to foster the development of strong, unified cultural identities within children, then the agency of the family might in many respects be a choice institution for promoting cultural cohesion throughout the process of socialization, and it cannot be denied that parents deservedly reserve a place at the educational table. Investing singular educational authority in the family, however, allows us to purchase cultural cohesion in identity formation only at the cost of all other vested social interests in the development of a child. In the first instance, the absolute transcendence of parental authority would remove all capacity for a pluralist society to put a halt to noxiously racist or discriminatory educational arrangements; if a parent wishes to inculcate an ideology of violent racism, misogyny, or xenophobia into his child, then he might object to the introduction of his child to multicultural or egalitarian sensibilities on the communitarian principle that any competing ideologies would only serve to undermine the coherence of his child's identity. Secondly, the transcendence of parental authority also fails to ensure access to basic intellectual development; any educational scheme meets with approval on this model so long as a parent proclaims its pedagogical goals to be culturally sacrosanct—even if, as in the case of some fundamentalist Mormon sects, the 'education' provided would prevent the child from attaining even the most minimal cognitive capacities.<sup>173</sup> The goal of cultural coherence in the individual's identity, as valuable as it might be, does not give parents *carte blanche* to ignore broader social interests in tolerance and individual cognitive development; communal interests in cultural coherence must be balanced against the trans-communal

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<sup>173</sup> For one of many autobiographical accounts, see Jeffs, *Lost Boy*.

interests of those parties outside of the community who are nevertheless impacted by practices internal to the community.

Support of the parentalist paradigm can only be maintained so long as we naively cling to the values of stability and consistency in ethical socialization over competing concerns for social harmony or personal integrity. Parental authority advocates often display a naïve or romanticized vision of the unfailing wisdom of parents' educational directives, insisting that the consistent cultural direction that the family can give to a child's socialization produces unmitigated benefits both for the child and for society at large.<sup>174</sup> But the consistency of a child's socialization does not in any way guarantee that the identity the child assumes will respect the dignity of others' identities, or even that the child will be minimally competent to confront the complex and fluctuating social circumstances of his adult life. A more clear-eyed appraisal of the socializing power of parents and the family would have to admit that while strong parental direction can provide consistency of educational authority, it could also promote identity complexes characterized by social hostility, discrimination, oppression, and incompetency. This is an educational paradigm that participants of contemporary society cannot accept wholesale, firstly because they each have a personal interest in living amongst individuals whose cultural identities discourage violent hostility towards their own way of life, and secondly because they each have a social interest in living amongst citizens who are intellectually and practically capable of mature participation in the life of the polity. The value of cultural consistency that underwrites the educational authority of parents must be mitigated by some other socially deferent set of principles; otherwise, the parentalist intervention is arguably more dangerous than the social malaise it was designed to cure.

Some theorists have sought to defend strict parental authority on slightly different grounds than the value of cultural consistency for a child's socialization, attempting to rescue the parental paradigm from the above difficulties by appealing to a notion of parents' "expressive rights" to educate their children as

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<sup>174</sup> "Mozert V. Hawkins County School Board" esp. the views of Vicki Frost as summarized in the ruling opinion.

they see fit. In reference again to the *Mozert* case, Nomi Stolzenberg argues that because the pluralist and multicultural curriculum imposed upon the *Mozert* families is “potentially inimical to the survival of their way of life,” it places in danger the parents’ ability to “transmit” their religious beliefs and identity to their children—an activity she deems essential to the pursuit of happiness.<sup>175</sup> Stephen Gilles has similarly advanced a notion of education as a means of cultural expression protected by the First Amendment right to free speech. Because “the project of educating our children...[is] a defining feature of our life plans,” Gilles argues, the state does genuine harm to parents, as well as to the child’s cultural socialization, when public institutions flout parental plans and preferences in favor of the institutional authority of the school and of teachers.<sup>176</sup> It is not just the consistent ethical socialization of children that is benefited by conceding primary educational jurisdiction to parents; it is the expressive right of the parent that is afforded due respect.

This alternative defense of parental authority, however, still does not address the central inadequacies of the parentalist model. Just as the value of consistent ethical socialization can come into conflict with alternative social interests in civil peace, non-domination, and individual cognitive development, a parent’s expressive rights can similarly conflict with these same social interests. Indeed, in the case of individual rights to speech and expression, the exigency of recognizing third-party interests in limiting these rights is even more prominent, for few would hold that one individual’s right to cultural expression trumps another individual’s rights to safety, non-discrimination, or expression. Legitimate personal and social interests intercede to draw limits around cultural expression and cultural exercise, and cultural expression through educational choice is subject to the same restrictions. The pressing question is not whether parental choice can trump all other interests as a matter of expressive right, but rather it is a question of precisely how and where the interests of the polity draw limits on

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<sup>175</sup> Stolzenberg, “‘He Drew a Circle That Shut Me Out’: Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education,” 584.

<sup>176</sup> Gilles, “On Educating Children: A Parentalist Manifesto,” 941.

cultural exercise.

The conferral of ultimate educational authority upon parents is but one possible application of communitarian principles to the realm of education, however, seeking to push back the culturally dissolving effects of the contemporary school system by relying upon the ethical resources of the family. The troubling implications of this model for civil peace and for social development reveal quite starkly the necessity of recognizing extra-cultural priorities in education, and hence the insufficiency of the institution of the family to serve as the primary educational executor. The need for cultural coherence in individual identities—the educational priority which the family stands relatively well placed to serve—must be balanced against other urgent social interests in educational development that are characteristic of contemporary pluralist societies, such as interests in civil peace and social competency. The communitarian impulse in education, if it is to survive, accordingly must be further developed to find alternative avenues of reform that accommodate the needs of cultural reproduction as well as broader trans-communal needs for social integration.

#### *§4.2 Educational Reconstruction 2: Cultural Maximalism and Civic Minimalism*

Although parental investment in schools undoubtedly bolsters the vitality of education, connecting together home and school life in mutually reinforcing ways, the gross expansion of parental authority sought by the *Mozert* parents and advocated by some theorists proves an inadequate and unsatisfactory strategy for supporting communal reconstruction. Parents' wishes for their children deserve to be respected, all things being equal, but parents' "expressive rights" are necessarily limited by the fundamental interests in, for example, social competency and tolerance that each and every individual holds in the educational process. Parental objections against the culturally non-neutral effects of the school system do not automatically command respect, therefore; parental wishes must be weighed against the educational aims that a politically organized society defines for itself as the minimal needs of

individual and social reproduction.

But which minimal educational goals, endorsed and enforced by extra-familial authorities, must parents and communally organized schools respect? Some basic social interests appear to be easily established as authoritative. It is relatively uncontroversial in a modern society committed to principles of equal dignity that all individuals must be raised to respect the liberties of others and to be capable of participating voluntarily in the social life of the polity. Accordingly, our society refuses to countenance, for a variety of reasons, the claims made by the patriarchs of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints that the practice of forcing teenage girls into “celestial marriages” with older men is a necessary cultural practice that prepares these young women for salvation. Not only does this oppressive educational practice run afoul of the moral beliefs of the majority of the population (a moral objection which arch-communalists might dismiss as culturally biased and hence non-obligating), but more ecumenically, it also directly conflicts with the social interest each subject possesses in ensuring that all members of society are minimally competent to participate in socio-political life.<sup>177</sup> Along the same lines, we have by and large deemed it unnecessary to defer to guardians who incite their charges to violence towards their fellow citizens, as was reportedly the case in the infamous “D.C. Sniper” killings.<sup>178</sup> Such practices conflict with the established social interest in maintaining civil peace and tolerance.

But these established social interests, communalists note, do not entirely preclude the possibility of a communally organized educational scheme; to the contrary, these interests only indicate that communal educational claims must be balanced against legitimate social interests in the development of all children. If parents wish to raise their children within a particular cultural context, their educational and developmental practices must withstand the criticisms of their fellow members of society and

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<sup>177</sup> The base-line interests in enabling socio-political participation will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 3 below.

<sup>178</sup> Bender, “Expert Witness Describes Making of a Serial Killer,” 13.

safeguard established social interests articulated by the surrounding polity. Within those bounds, however, there remains ample room for the development of cultural identity alongside social capacities. With the aim of carving out space for a culturally robust education that, unlike the parental model, can balance both cultural and social interests, some communitarians, like William Galston and Kevin McDonough, have accordingly shifted their energies to advancing a more nuanced model of communal education. Rather than investing ultimate educational jurisdiction in parents, this model advocates for the use of public funds to support identity-specific schools, so long as these schools abide by minimal safeguards for social interests; minimal civic standards allow for maximal cultural development. This revised form of schooling for cultural identity resolves some of the contradictions and controversies of the parentalist model, but ultimately its success or failure as an educational strategy will depend upon whether a firm and final list of “minimal” social interests can be established.

The model of cultural identity schools seeks to find room for identity-fostering education within the public system, and consequently it must begin by recognizing the legitimacy of at least some of the aims of this cross-cultural, trans-communal system. Galston, accordingly, concedes that a number of substantive social purposes rightly limit parental authority and regulate the processes of individual identity and character development; regardless of cultural inheritance, he argues that all citizens must be raised to possess “the settled disposition to obey the law,” “the capacity to understand...the core principles of one’s society,” “the disposition to respect the rights of others,” and “the capacity to evaluate the talents, character, and performance of public officials.”<sup>179</sup> These are the essential educational aims that every individual in a liberal-democratic society, regardless of cultural background, must allow as necessary for the continued existence of civil society; the needs themselves are simply derived from an analysis of how the liberal-democratic system in the United States currently operates. Galston recognizes a certain trans-communal legitimacy in this group of basic social dispositions and

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<sup>179</sup> Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State,” 89.

capacities, but outside of this constrained set of minimal civic standards, he argues that the desires or wishes of secular civil society must give way to the culturally particular educational programs of communities.

While American public school systems have historically sought to attain their trans-communal ends through strategies of common schooling—gathering together children of diverse cultural and economic backgrounds, subjecting them to the same academic and disciplinary standards, inculcating obedience to a common authority as well as respect for one another—Galston argues that there is no compelling pedagogical reason to withhold support from communally supported institutions that provide their students with a more culturally specific education. Indeed, within the context of an atomizing, aggressively materialistic society, there are perhaps good reasons not just to tolerate, but to positively encourage the formation of schools that cultivate particular, substantive ethical identities in their students. “The greatest threat to children in modern liberal societies is not that they will believe in something too deeply,” Galston claims, “but that they will believe in nothing very deeply at all.”<sup>180</sup> Absent a robust common ethical culture that command the assent of the citizenry on the whole, a diverse pluralist society ought to support educational institutions constructed around communities that promote a comprehensive conception of individual flourishing, giving children a stable sense of value and commitment confirmed by their social surroundings.

Galston’s theoretical ideal of culturally specific educational strategies closely tracks the real world, practical development of voucher programs, charter schools, “Afrocentric” curricula designed for Black communities, non-English language academies for immigrant populations, and other alternatives to the dominant public school paradigm. In the case of some historically marginalized social groups, the establishment of separate schools with strong cultural curricula is viewed as a chance for developing members of the group to counteract the pervasive negative image of their community and traditions

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 101.

they face in the wider public sphere. American Indian children, for example, do not have effective control over how they will be perceived by the dominant Euro-American society they find themselves born into, and the tensions between native and non-native society they already face as children will most likely be a defining feature of their adult lives as well. Advocates of culturally centered indigenous education argue that such schools will provide students with a positive and stable understanding of themselves as American Indians that will serve as a sound foundation of values and esteem to guide them through their future encounters with a potentially hostile dominant culture. Dianne Longboat thus argues that Indian children must in their early years be educated in native languages, customs, and spiritual beliefs: “The development of Indian human beings involves this type of affective growth...A First Nations person must first know himself, his clan, his nation, and his responsibilities if he is to function as an Indian.”<sup>181</sup> These cultural goals do not conflict with the educational task of cultivating a “settled disposition to obey the law,” but neither can they be achieved through a school that merely teaches towards broad social objectives.

To take another example, writers concerned with the urban life of African-Americans following the “Great Migration” have articulated similar programs of Afrocentric education. Black students in many urban districts are already isolated from the white student population, but the curriculum of their schools fails to recognize the unique circumstances and challenges of their social experience; the standardized curriculum cannot easily be tailored to attack the educational alienation that minority youths often feel when subsumed under a curriculum designed primarily with white students in mind. An Afrocentric curriculum, it is argued, would help students understand their lives as a part of a larger African-American experience, providing them not only with a sense of their cultural history and social location, but also extending to them a fuller set of role models and life aspirations than the current

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<sup>181</sup> Quoted in McDonough, “Can the Liberal State Support Cultural Identity Schools?,” 485.



public school might offer.<sup>182</sup>

Aside from the projected benefits for young people's self-understanding, advocates of these "cultural identity" schools also tout the advantages these schools would bring to the fraying communities they serve. Drawing on the results of a broad sociological study comparing the community connections of religiously affiliated versus public high schools, James Coleman has argued that the substantive agreements of belief and culture that unite the parents who send their children to religious schools provide those schools with a far greater degree of "social capital."<sup>183</sup> Parents tied to Catholic schools in particular, Coleman notes, share two important resources: first, they share a social network that facilitates communication and enables them to identify problems within the school community as they emerge; second, they share a general set of norms and expectations concerning the aims of education and the role of parents, which enable them to hold one another accountable for their duties to their children and the school. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Coleman observes that such culturally unified schools not only perform well academically, but they also have significantly fewer dropout rates. Moreover, the benefits of the social capital generated around the school extend further into the community; social capital is not merely a resource useful for educational purposes, for the densely interwoven networks of association some schools support also generate spillover benefits of civic trust, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility that can benefit a variety of other social purposes.

The cultural identity school is thus touted by its advocates as a win-win model: on the one hand, advocates advertise a number of communal, personal, and civic benefits that their model of identity-centric schooling is supposed to produce—benefits for social capital, for civic trust, and for personal self-esteem; on the other hand, advocates also shield their model from frequent socially minded criticisms by acknowledging in advance the transcendent legitimacy of established social interests in education over the dictates of cultural identity formation. Thus, a critic who argues that an insular education in

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<sup>182</sup> Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education."

<sup>183</sup> Coleman, "Families and Schools," 95–120.

the customs and mores of one single cultural group might fail to cognitively prepare a child for social participation is offered the assurance that in addition to their cultural work, all schools must prepare students with “the capacity to understand...the core principles of one’s society”; the established social interest in having all members of society “understand the core principles” of that society transcends any retrograde or parochial cultural belief that might militate against broader social exposure.<sup>184</sup> The work of cultural identity formation, this model assures, can deliver its benefits without undermining the fundamental educational needs of the pluralist society itself.

Despite these assurances of communal and social coexistence in education, however, the cultural identity model remains problematically incomplete along one critical dimension; namely, it counterfactually presumes stable, near universal social agreement concerning a set of minimal trans-communal educational interests that will trump cultural preferences. In the case of Galston’s model, the established social interests are read off the face of society as a simple list of the pre-determined needs of presently existing social structure: because we have an electoral system, citizens need to be prepared to evaluate candidates; because our legal system is based upon individual rights, citizens need to respect the rights of others, etc. As long as a school provides its students with these basic capacities, logistically necessary for the continuation of contemporary society, the school can fulfill the rest of its educational mission according to the lights of its constituents’ culture. But there is no recognition in this model of the fact that even these “minimal” social interests are themselves the subject of ongoing contention, or indeed that social interests in education are constantly redefined through public debate and are responsive to the shifting needs of the present. Even something as basic as cross-cultural tolerance, for example, lacks any consensually secured substance as a educational goal, for it is a matter of public disagreement not only which actions or beliefs merit tolerance—some things that were once civically respectable are no longer tolerated, and vice versa—but more fundamentally whether this social

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<sup>184</sup> Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State,” 89.

interest requires that individuals maintain a positive and receptive attitude towards difference or merely that they do not violently oppose difference. This flexibility of social interests across time and across segments of the public confounds the cultural identity model insofar as it throws into question the very idea of a minimal set of social interests that secures the legitimacy of the culturally organized school.

The inability of the cultural identity model to cope with intransigent disagreement is made especially clear if we consider one prominent example of the often-fierce debate that arises around differing interpretations of commanding social interests: namely, the problem of educating for individual autonomy. Much of the concern surrounding the cultural identity strategy—separating children of a particular religious or ethnic community from the general student population in order to induct them into a culturally specific set of ethical ideals and communal relationships—has issued from liberal critics, who are particularly mindful of the dangers of insularity and oppression that can arise within exclusionary communities.<sup>185</sup> Education, these critics contend, must provide at least a minimal degree of support for personal autonomy such that a child is made aware that other social roles, other communities, and other ways of life are available to her as she enters adulthood. There is a legitimate social interest in an autonomy-guaranteeing education, on this account, because no member of society can, upon reflection, reasonably endorse an educational system that would have violated his or her own basic capacities of choice and foreclosed the possibility of reflective endorsement itself.

This liberal critique of the cultural identity model has been given an especially forceful articulation by K. Anthony Appiah, who cuts through the sometimes romanticizing description communitarian writers give of ethnicity and culturally unified communal groups and points out the potential for stifling oppression within these groups. Although it is tempting to imagine the Afrocentric high school or the indigenous language academy as places where marginalized social groups can unify and restore a sense of identity, history, and purpose with which they can confront a hostile world, Appiah points out that

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<sup>185</sup> Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*; Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education*; Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*.

the cultivation of a singular ethnic identity also tends to narrow the range of possible expressions an individual might give to his self-understanding. Appiah wonders if, by supporting the construction of a proud and culturally specific identity, these efforts at communal reconstruction do not turn culture from a dynamic resource individuals draw upon to make sense of their lives into yet another homogenizing and heteronomous social force.

I think we need...to ask whether the identities constructed in this way are ones we—I speak here as someone who counts in America as a gay black man—can be happy with in the longer run.

Demanding respect for people as blacks and as gays requires that there are some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another...I would like other options.<sup>186</sup>

The hegemony of identity “scripts,” potentially reinforced by cultural identity schools, becomes particularly malevolent in those all too frequent cases where subordination, discrimination, and ostracism exist *internally* to marginalized social groups as well as externally. Shoring up cultural identities may have the unintended effect of strengthening harmful or oppressive identifications associated with gender, sexuality, class, disability, or other transversal identity categories that intersect with the communal relations of religion and culture.<sup>187</sup>

At the heart of this criticism is a claim about an authoritative social interest that ought to transcend the dictates of cultural practice—precisely the sort of problem of educational priorities which the cultural model hopes to contain—but this particular autonomy-based claim is pointedly problematic for communalists because it threatens to undercut the very foundations of the cultural identity model. Appiah’s critique questions whether an isolated introduction into one singular cultural milieu does not,

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<sup>186</sup> Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” 162–163.

<sup>187</sup> Alston, “Community Politics and the Education of African American Males: Whose Life Is It Anyway?”.

by its very nature, violate a transcendent social interest in liberating individuals to choose their own paths in life. Members of all cultural groups, the thought goes, ought to find the prospect of identity-compulsion intolerable, and once we recognize the unacceptability of compelling an individual to adopt a particular identity without any say in the matter, it would seem that all schools—even those heavily invested in shoring up the fraying cultural mores and customs of their target populations—have an obligation to expose students to a number of alternative “scripts” that would allow them to authentically explore and choose identities that suit their talents, desires, and personal experience. Many cultural identity theorists, however, will refuse the legitimacy of this purported social interest in cosmopolitan identity-choice precisely because it militates against the reproduction of many traditional cultural identities in new generations. “In the guise of protecting the capacity for diversity,” Galston writes, “the autonomy principle in fact represents a kind of uniformity that exerts pressure on ways of life that do not embrace autonomy.”<sup>188</sup> Rather than valorizing choice between identity scripts, the cultural identity model sees a transcendent social interest in preserving endangered cultures; there is a transcendent educational interest in providing society with a truly diverse range of cultural identities that individuals can, as adults, adapt and transform according to their experiences and desires, even if this entails that we limit the range of identities available to individuals as children.

At stake here are two competing interpretations of a commanding social interest in education, neither of which can easily accommodate the claims of the other without abandoning its own principled foundation. On the one hand, Appiah and other liberal theorists, like Jeremy Waldron, begin with a demanding principle of autonomy that insists schools must avoid locking children’s life trajectories into a single, potentially restrictive identity from an early age; because these theorists interpret the universal interest in non-domination as a right to autonomous cultural choice, they can brook no compromise

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<sup>188</sup> Galston, “Two Concepts of Liberalism,” 523.

with a cultural school that refuses children access to alternative ways of life.<sup>189</sup> On the other hand, communitarian theorists like Galston begin with a principle of cultural autonomy that insists that the interests of society, as well as the interests of the nascent identities of children, are best served by supporting strong communal contexts of custom and cultural identification; some children will rightfully be educated to develop a certain cultural identity before they have the capacity to *choose* that identity autonomously—choice will only come later in life as they enter adulthood. Between these two interpretations of the social interest in cultural education, a middle ground is difficult to locate.

I do not propose to settle this dispute between autonomy-minded liberals and culture-minded communitarians through some theoretical slicing of the Gordian knot; to the contrary, I have described this turbulent dispute to demonstrate instead the potentially insurmountable difficulty that prevents any theorist from offering any non-controversial account of the minimal social interests in education. Not merely in the case of autonomy and individual choice, but all the way down the line of purportedly “established” social interests there can be found divergent and contentious interpretations of what a modern pluralist society requires of its educational institutions and what scope can be afforded to the parochial educational practices of separatist cultures. The precise meanings of tolerance, of social competence, of obedience to the law, and any number of other social interests are all subject to open public dispute. The cultural identity model secures its legitimacy by endorsing in advance a set of minimal social interests in education that it will promise to safeguard, but the unresolved disputes over the content of this minimal list will always prevent the cultural identity school from finally securing its legitimacy and at last begin the work of cultural education. For this reason, the cultural school cannot insulate itself from the realm of political debate.

What the dispute between liberals and communitarians over the issue of autonomy reveals, therefore, is that the work of education must not only give credence to the demands of community and

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<sup>189</sup> Waldron, “Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative.”

society, but it must also attend to a third intersubjective realm of political life. Insofar as the cultural identity model assumes tidy agreement around basic social interests, it can cope with the needs of the socius and can attend more assiduously to the needs of cultural communities; but this basic assumption ignores the persistent, inevitable atmosphere of disagreement that pervades modern pluralist societies—a form of disagreement that gives rise to the political body of the public. Because there simply is no non-controversial set of “minimal” social interests in education, and because social interests are always in the process of redefinition in the light of changing circumstances, a pluralist society must negotiate its disagreements in a trans-communal space of debate and contestation.

Not only must cultural schools respond to the basic structural needs of society by preparing children to minimally participate in social life, therefore, but because the minimal interests of social life are themselves subject to ongoing public debate, cultural groups must also be prepared to offer a full-throated defense of their interests and practices before a concerned public. All cultural groups, in order to sustain themselves in an atmosphere of persistent critique and disagreement, must provide their members with the cognitive and practical tools needed to defend their identities and their group’s interest in political debate. The cultural identity model, with its idealizing assumption of “minimal” civic interests, would allow for a wholly apolitical development of individuals; but this apolitical education perniciously hinders the public work of defining and refining social interests in light of changing circumstances, preventing individual group members from articulating the evolving needs and emergent problems experienced by their community. Any model of schooling sufficient for modern conditions, therefore, must not only recognize the minimal interests of society and must not only support the work of cultural development—it must also ensure the continued operations of an active public that can define social interest and that can articulate the forceful claims of community and culture. Schools, in short, have a *political* obligation, unaccounted for by the cultural identity model, to give students the skills of political engagement that will enable the socius to define its interests and enable the cultural

group to defend its practices before the concerned public.

## **§5 Democratic Education**

In the two preceding sections, I have examined two different avenues of educational reform that have been proposed by communitarians as sound foundations for effecting communal and cultural reconstruction in a fragmented society. Both of these programs, however, have quickly run aground due to their inability to negotiate the conflicting social interests that underlie contemporary educational institutions. The attempt to reestablish cultural contexts of ethical socialization by pressing claims of parental rights against institutional authorities fails to establish principled grounds for limiting parental jurisdiction when an educational practice threatens vital social interests. Insofar as the argument for strong parental rights thus works on a hopeful but unrealistic assumption that parents' wishes will never be harmful to their children or to society, it is an argument that no member of society could unconditionally endorse without sacrificing his own interests in shaping a *socius* supportive of his own way of life. Some publicly defined regulating principle or mediating authority must decipher the balance between the social interests in education and the claims of parents and community.

The argument from cultural identity partially succeeds on this score; it recognizes the legitimacy of trans-communal interests in education, and it attempts to navigate a course that supports the well-being of the child, the community, and society through the solidification of culture within the school. Cultural identities are important social-psychological resources that enable the child to orient his life, at least initially, according to certain communally supported and culturally validated standards and values; these cultural resources ought to be given maximal leeway in educational matters so long as minimal social interests are safeguarded. This civically minimal approach to community-minded education reform, although it happily escapes the problems of the parentalism model, still contains at least one crippling deficiency at its foundation. Namely, it falsely assumes that the minimal interests of society



can be determined analytically by an empirical study of contemporary social structures. Because social interests are themselves always in flux and always subject to vigorous public debate, however, education for cultural identity must always be prepared to defend its goals and its practices before the tribunal of a concerned public. There is no apolitical safe-space for cultural education within the fence of minimal social interests, because the boundaries of what a pluralist society allows or prohibits in educational matters are always shifting. In addition to educating children for cultural identity, and in addition to educating children to fulfill basic social needs, all schools must further engage in a form of political education that enables individuals to participate in the public debate that will mediate the relation between culture and society.

Although the communalist movement in contemporary education begins with a perceptive critique of the culturally disintegrating force of the school today, the attempt to remediate this fragmenting and anomic education purely through the auspices of community runs hard up against certain persistent conditions of modern society that ultimately make pure communalism unworkable. In a culturally diverse, economically integrated modern society, the educational practices and affairs of any one cultural group can have a forceful impact upon the affairs of any other group, and thus every group possesses a legitimate social interest in the education of children inside and outside of its communal sphere. Furthermore, because the precise scope and substance of the legitimate trans-communal social interests in education are subject to far-reaching interpretive disagreement, it takes an intense engagement in the political activities of debate, contestation, and deliberation to gather support for even a provisional charter for divergent educational arrangements. Any cultural group that seeks to take the lead in the education and ethical socialization of its rising generation, departing from the model of the common school, will be called first to demonstrate its non-interference with vital social interests or, second, to articulate how its particular understanding of social interests differs from the consensus. Even the most separatist community in a pluralist society pragmatically must cooperatively participate in

the political sphere of social negotiation, and to ensure its reproduction into the future it must prepare future group members to politically represent the group's views and interests as well. If a scheme of communal education neglects to prepare its charges with the political capacities to engage in the sphere of democratic discourse, it has failed to understand the inexorably political underpinnings of a modern pluralist society, and it has failed to ensure its community's continued survival. Cultural survival, and social reproduction more generally, depends upon the ability of individuals from diverse backgrounds to discuss, to raise concerns, and to consciously respond to the shared problems they confront as a collectivity.

Beneath the claims of culture, therefore, and beneath the purely economic interests of social life, there persists a foundational educational demand for political capacitation; the need for general democratic preparation in a pluralist society is the platform educational purpose that makes possible the more specific pursuits of social integration and/or cultural revitalization. Indeed, the democratic capacities of the socius are in an important sense pragmatically presumed by all participants in educational debate—even by those communalists, like the *Mozert* parents, who would exempt their children from any trans-communal social exposure; as soon as any individual petitions the broader public or its institutions for recognition of his educational aims, that individual has made use of the pre-existing democratic capacities of the socius to further his educational mission. Even as the various parties to educational reform disputes disagree vigorously about how schools ought to be organized in their community, or what the ethical content of the curriculum should be, by advancing an argument for why their schemes merit public support to the audience of the trans-communal public, participants in educational debate fall back upon a social capability that they are all reciprocally responsible for reproducing—that is, the capability of the socius to come together as a public that can consciously and collectively decipher their shared interests. In this sense, even members of conflicting cultural groups and educational lobbies are brought together into the structure of an overarching collective social

project: the project of reproducing the politically organized agency of a pluralist society as a democratic public.

The need for political preparation and democratic reproduction, however, does not by any means negate the forceful claims that communitarians have made in favor of returning some portion of the work of ethical socialization to culturally unified communities. Indeed, by stabilizing educational practice around a unifying social commitment to reproducing the democratic political sphere, we potentially lay the groundwork for a revitalization of the communal role in education. In her landmark work on *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann lucidly explains how the shared commitment to democratic reproduction opens space for a justified articulation of cultural differences in education:

We are committed to collectively re-creating the society that we share. Although we are not collectively committed to any particular set of educational aims, we are committed to arriving at an agreement on our educational aims (an agreement that could take the form of justifying a diverse set of educational aims and authorities).<sup>190</sup>

Because members of a pluralist society are thrown together in their economic and social interactions despite their sometimes-deep differences in cultural custom and belief, they are perforce committed both to negotiating the common rules of their social life through democratic mechanisms and to *reproducing* those mechanisms for future disagreements. Note, however, that this shared commitment to reproducing the political foundations of pluralist society does not in fact suppose that a public must reach a consensus upon *one* form of schooling or *one* exhaustive curriculum that all parents and teachers must uniformly implement; to the contrary, the formalistic aim of democratic education invites families, communities, churches, and other interested groups to articulate how their vision of educational aims and goods merits public support, or at least merits public tolerance.

Within a democratically unified educational system, therefore, there remains room for separatist

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<sup>190</sup> Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 2nd Ed.:39.

educational arrangements so long as the basic needs for political reproduction in the next generation are met. Indeed, if a particular social group can articulate compelling reasons for their separation from the common educational system—as many communitarian writers have attempted to do—then the democratic public is empowered not merely to permit, but positively to support culturally distinct educational practices. If, as communitarian writers have asserted, the current educational system undermines the process of ethical socialization, fragments children’s nascent cultural identities, substitutes material reward for personal fulfillment, and ultimately delivers to its charges an anomic and monochrome identity structure, then these educational inadequacies can be presented before the public in support of culturally specific educational arrangements. No other body than the political agency of the public, however, can decipher whether the communalist complaint merits separatist schools, or whether separatist schools would grossly violate the interests of other groups.

There is room for communalism in contemporary education, therefore, but communalism alone is insufficient to meet the challenges of a modern pluralist society. Only a romantic attachment to the old practices of familial and cultural education could lead us to transfer all educational authority to the hands of communal leaders without regard to the crossing and conflicting demands that various dissenting cultural, social, and economic interests place upon education. Because one family’s educational practice impacts the broader neighborhood, and because the curriculum of one cultural school inevitably affects the surrounding communities, education in an economically integrated, culturally diverse society will always be subject to oversight and critique by all affected parties. Rather than transferring educational authority strictly to the auspices of traditional communities, educational reformers must recognize the pressing pragmatic need also to support and reproduce the democratic political mechanisms that allow divergent communities to negotiate their differing interests and to confront shared emergent problems. The jurisdiction of the democratic public over cultural practice is an authority that empowers all individuals and groups to protect their own trans-communal interests,

and the tribunal of the public oversees education to ensure that the practice of one separatist group does not endanger the flourishing of the rest. As members of a pluralist society, therefore, we may diverge considerably over questions of belief and cultural custom, but we have a convergent pragmatic interest in supporting and reproducing the mechanisms of democratic negotiation. It is not cultural reproduction, but rather democratic reproduction that serves as the unifying educational purpose in a pluralist society.

## Chapter 3

### Reciprocity or Problematization? Competing Principles of Democratic Education

One of the most vital sources of reformist energies in recent educational debates has been the widespread desire to rebuild strong communities and reinforce cultural schemes of value, pitting the developmental functions of education against the pervasive influence of an atomistic and materialistic culture of consumption. Behind the shared front of a community-centered reform project in education, conservative religious communities have thus found themselves in common cause with ethnic identity theorists and left-leaning advocates of participatory democracy. Such pairings would undoubtedly make for uncomfortable political alliances in wider public debate, but these diverse constituencies nevertheless voice parallel complaints against the school as it is presently organized: they criticize the disorienting effect that the “neutral” public curriculum inflicts upon young individuals’ nascent identities, and they lament the processes of communal disintegration that the professionalized, bureaucratic control of the school only serves to accelerate.

The community-centered critique of the school examined in the last chapter, I believe, presents compelling arguments for revising the status quo of public education in America; liberal educational schemes to negotiate a non-offensive, compromise curriculum that serves the needs of all of the country’s diverse constituencies in the final analysis ends up serving only the economic needs of the productive population. Instead of securing cultural or communal neutrality, the school as it presently stands arguably fosters the development of a disassociated individual, motivated by the forces of a market society rather than by the bonds of communal connections or mutually recognized ethical

values. Despite the perspicacity of this critical account of the school, however, I have tried to indicate the insufficiency of the communal ideal as a singular or self-sufficient model for educational reconstruction. In particular, I have argued that the utility of the communally organized school confronts sharp limits when its program runs contrary to vested social interests in securing tolerance and social competence, or in enabling a life of political participation. Supporting robust cultural identities and revitalizing communal relationships are important public tasks that a reconstructed school system might positively contribute to, but the social goods produced through these efforts do not trump or displace the other valuable functions that contemporary citizens expect their schools to perform.

In place of the competing ideals of the school either as an economic institution of individual capacity-building or as a communal institution of cultural identity formation, I have thus followed Amy Gutmann's proposal that educational theory and policy might focus on elaborating the *democratic* aims of education in order to better negotiate the competing demands placed upon the institution of the school. All participants in educational policy debates—communitarians, liberals, standards reformers, business interests—publicly advance reasons and arguments to defend their vision of how the school ought to be organized, and in so doing they rely upon a democratic political process to win recognition of their claims. The public, as the political self-organization of society, deliberates about how best to reproduce or reconstruct itself, and while this democratic process allows wide latitude to arguments that advance a vision of communal solidarity and cultural identity, it also demands reflexive recognition of the need to prepare individuals for participation in the democratic process itself. The democratic polis must reproduce democratic citizens into the future in order to cope with the fact of pluralism and to confront changing circumstances and novel social problems. By placing continued democratic participation at the forefront of our educational aims, therefore, we can perhaps better respond to the critical claims of community without losing the public's resiliency to adapt to new, emergent social problems.

This democratic foundation for educational reconstruction, however, hinges entirely upon a better understanding of what the democratic public is or should be, as well as upon an elucidation of what skills and dispositions citizens need in order to participate in it. It is this set of questions that I would like to begin to address in this chapter. Do citizens merely need to understand the procedural rules by which their government functions? Do they only need to know how to assess the performance of public officials and elect political experts that will defend their perceived interests? Or does the democratic polity require more of its citizenry, drawing individuals into collective enterprises of deliberation and cooperative self-governance? Obviously such questions are themselves subject to intense public disagreement and contention, and even a provisional resolution of the problem would perhaps ultimately have to be forged out of the fires of the democratic contest itself.

Nevertheless, in this chapter I would like to advance an argument for constructing democratic education around one particular model of democratic praxis—a model that emphasizes the collective activities of cooperative social inquiry and problematization as the key public contributions to social stability and political responsiveness. In many respects, this model takes its cue from the ideals of deliberative democracy as elucidated by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, which I will explore in §1 of this chapter. Gutmann and Thompson have argued that the legitimacy and success of democratic politics depends upon the processes of deliberation and reciprocal reason-giving by which the public produces mutually acceptable solutions to collective problems. In a diverse society, deliberative political processes are necessary for negotiating deep moral disagreements that persist within the citizenry; even though citizens will never absolutely agree upon the best policies for governing their polity, the constraint that all proposed policies must be justified by publicly accessible reasons, along with the process of subjecting those policies to vigorous internal criticism, ensures that the state enacts only policies that all citizens will be able to view as legitimate, even if they continue to disagree with the



substance of the decision.<sup>191</sup> Gutmann and Thompson perceive in their conception of deliberative reciprocity the substantive foundation of democratic education: the practice of civic reciprocity, on their account, would seem to require a prior commitment on the part of all citizens to discovering mutually acceptable terms of social cooperation.<sup>192</sup>

In §2, however, I examine some exigent difficulties that emerge as soon as we attempt to translate this ideal moral commitment to social cooperation into an educational program. In order for any program of robust democratic praxis and civically minded education to secure public support, it will have to withstand at least two ever-present challenges: on the one hand, any successful conception of democratic education must prove its flexibility in negotiating the competing demands placed upon the school by diverse socio-cultural constituencies; on the other hand, it must simultaneously prove that it provides the strong civic resources needed to encourage political responsiveness to emergent social needs. On each of these counts, I believe that Gutmann and Thompson's model of reciprocity encounters significant problems. Theorists concerned with the preservation of thick contexts of cultural meaning, for example, have criticized Gutmann and Thompson's notion of civic reciprocity on the grounds that it unnecessarily forces citizens with deep seated religious or cultural commitments to separate their privately held moral convictions from public debate—a process, it is argued, that is especially harmful for the nascent identities of young citizens.<sup>193</sup> At the same time, some democratic theorists have worried that the standard of reciprocity homogenizes democratic discourse in a way that screens out valuable strands of criticism voiced by the oppressed, the marginalized, or the disaffected.<sup>194</sup> While Gutmann and Thompson envision deliberative reciprocity as a moral ideal that binds together the citizens of a democratic polity in the task of self-governance, there are reasonable

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<sup>191</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>193</sup> Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*.

<sup>194</sup> For three versions of this criticism, from non-aligned theoretical camps, see Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*; Habermas, "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure."

grounds upon which we might question whether the moral demands of reciprocity might “overburden” the citizen to a degree damaging to both political stability and responsiveness.<sup>195</sup>

Finally, in §3, I turn to the work of Jürgen Habermas in order to reformulate a robust model of democratic citizenship that recognizes the internal connection between thick communal contexts of identity formation and the active public sphere of democracy. Habermas of course concurs with Gutmann and Thompson that the legitimacy and coherence of the democratic polity is the product of an ongoing public conversation, a deliberative discussion that surrounds, informs, and legitimates the technical institutions of governance; indeed, Habermas’ model of the public sphere has in this sense served as a primary inspiration for much of the work of the past two decades that flies under the banner of deliberative democracy.<sup>196</sup> Unlike Gutmann and Thompson, however, Habermas does not overburden the processes of public discussion with the expectation that all individual participants will phrase their political claims in a publicly accessible language designed to maximize internal understanding. Although the rigors of public debate might encourage citizens to adopt this commitment to mutual accessibility, Habermas recognizes that the motivations that cause citizens to enter the public sphere in the first place are often derived from idiosyncratic, sectarian belief systems. Public participation in democratic discourse thus depends upon the ability for various segments of the citizenry to publicize problems within their sphere of social experience for political correction. It is this initially blinkered recognition of pervasive social dangers, and not a robust moral commitment to promoting mutual understanding, that serves as the solid civic foundation for the ongoing practice of public discourse and deliberative politics.

The great virtue of Habermas’ account of public communication and democratic debate, I believe, is that Habermas does not presuppose in advance a commitment on the part of the citizenry to the task of producing a shared social world marked by comity and mutual understanding—a thick moral

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<sup>195</sup> Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure,” 487.

<sup>196</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

commitment that not all citizens or groups will initially hold. To the contrary, the motivations that Habermas cites as compelling reasons for citizens to participate in democratic processes arise independently of any individual citizen's or cultural group's desire to understand and get along with others within their society. Thus, while Gutmann and Thompson find themselves in the difficult position of convincing isolationist cultural groups that the moral ideal of mutual understanding is itself independently worthy of their devotion, Habermas skirts this issue by appealing instead to the shared threats to cultural values and communal cohesion that are posed by broader socio-economic forces that affect the survival of all communities within contemporary diverse societies. Democracy is founded upon the pragmatic-critical activity of *problematization*, with the political virtue of *reciprocity* developing only as a late-ripening fruit of ongoing political participation.

These disputes between democratic theorists over the nature of democratic practice are vital for education, because without a clear conception of democratic citizenship, critical educational theory lacks a unifying goal to orient reform and reconstruction. Numerous parties critical of the educational *status quo* agree that the present school system is held in the sway of an economic rationality of increased productivity and job preparation and that it produces a form of market-centered subjectivity destructive of cultural identity and social cooperation. The various schemes of reform examined thus far, however, rely upon old models of communal integration that are not responsive to the divergent and competing educational demands of a pluralist society; transferring educational authority to the institutions of the family or the cultural community alone neglects the pressing trans-communal interests that society at large possesses in the education of every child. If, however, critical educational theory can reorganize itself around the mission of reproducing the political mechanisms of public dialogue and negotiation, then it can democratically safeguard the trans-communal interests of the *socius* while still allowing room for a cultural or communal reconstruction of the school. Clarifying the dispositions, skills, and habits of an active democratic citizen, therefore, is essential for contesting and

overcoming the economic rationality of the contemporary school system.

### **§1 Democratic Citizenship as Reciprocity**

When citizens engage one another in a public debate concerning the best direction for the reform of the school system, they inevitably advance a number of competing claims that stand in potential conflict with one another. Different parties petition the public for different policies of recalibration or revision based upon different political values, social interests, and personal beliefs. Some of the buzzing confusion of the claims made in this ongoing public educational debate has been unearthed in the preceding investigations: the school is variously called upon to prepare individual children with the skills needed for economic success, to consolidate communal ties around a common cultural identity, to protect the social order against criminal vices, or to enable individuals to engage in cosmopolitan identity formation. Not all of these claims are supportable or redeemable by the same institutions, and indeed the incompatibility of the public's various educational aims might in turn discourage us from searching for any common educational ground.

Nevertheless, one potential resource for broad-based educational reform emerges when we consider the underlying commitment to the public process of educational debate itself—a commitment by individual members of society to engage in the political process of clarifying and realizing social interests in education. By advancing publicly accessible reasons for supporting particular educational goals—whether individualist, communalist, parentalist, or any other possibility—participants in educational debate participate in a fragile collective pursuit in which disparate members of society come together to discern where their interests align and where they depart, as well as to develop mutually acceptable initiatives to achieve shared aims. Although they might never be able to reach ultimate agreement on all of the precise details of a unified, ideal educational arrangement, the singular shared commitment to the political practices of public debate and conversation that citizens reveal by virtue of

their engagement in public argumentation would seem to indicate that the goal of *political* reproduction might serve as a unifying foundation for the pursuit of educational reform.

Even within the democratic project in education, however, disagreement persists, for there is no single way that citizens engage in democratic politics. Accordingly, we cannot simply read a model of democratic education off of our current social practices. While a portion of the American population might view the essence of democratic politics in the activist and conflictual practices of protest, petition, and “direct action” campaigns, others object to this confrontational approach in favor of the more staid tactics of traditional electoral campaigns and legislative bargaining. To cite some familiar reference points: between the direct campaigns of SNCC and the judicial appeals of the NAACP, are there any shared activities that all can agree are necessary for democracy? Or again, between the civil disobedience of Earth First! and the Congressional lobbying of the Sierra Club, what are the modes of political participation required for the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic governance? A consensus-securing answer is not easy to discover, for while supporters of traditional electoral politics might object to activist politics as a socially fragmentary force, the reverse criticism might be made that a purely electoral politics tends to perpetuate a status quo that benefits the majority at the continual expense of minorities.

This example of civic disagreement is of course characteristic of the situation of a democratic society. Citizens from divergent backgrounds, possessing different political commitments, find themselves thrown together in a common social environment, the proper regulation of which they do not agree upon. Given that democratic citizens cannot even come to a consensus about what degree of political participation ought to be encouraged within their society, many theorists have accordingly argued that the political demands placed upon democratic citizens must be minimal. Democracy, in the minds of many “aggregative” theorists both historical and contemporary, is a set of decision procedures by which disagreements between various social constituencies might be brought to an expedient

resolution by electoral means.<sup>197</sup> Whether through a universal plebiscite, or through a ballot within a smaller representative body, individuals who share a social sphere with one another, but who possess divergent sets of interests and beliefs, are given the chance to vote in favor of their interests, and the controlling interest determines the course of action that will be taken at least until the next electoral cycle.

This widely used democratic procedure does offer a convenient and practical way of dealing with internal disagreement within a democratic society, but does it exhaust the content of democratic procedures? Do future citizens need only to be prepared to analyze a slate of options placed before them as electors in order to determine where their self-evident interests lie? While vote-seeking politicians might profitably conduct their campaigns by focusing purely upon the electoral mechanisms of aggregation and interest group bargaining, an insightful alternative strand of democratic theory has argued that the totality of democratic politics cannot be so easily collapsed into the single moment of interest tabulation. The informal processes of debate and discussion that always precede the taking of a vote, on the model of deliberative democracy, reveal a set of important, if idealizing, presuppositions that motivate citizen's acceptance and participation in the political system: suppositions that interests are not predefined, that groups can splinter and reform, and that citizens might be persuaded by reason as much as they are motivated by objectively calculable material interests.<sup>198</sup>

The central problem with aggregative models of democratic practice, according to most deliberative theorists, is that they fail to offer an explanation of the legitimacy of their political mechanisms sufficient to motivate citizens to abide by the results of electoral contests and legislative processes. If citizens in a diverse society conceived of democracy solely as a method of tabulating the balance of individual interests, there would be little reason for members of minority interest groups to continue to

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<sup>197</sup> For three variants on the aggregative perspective, see Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*; Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*; Shapiro, "Enough of Deliberation: Politics Is About Interests and Power."

<sup>198</sup> Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," 249–250; Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 13–21.

participate in electoral contests; after repeated experiences of having one's own interests perpetually overshadowed by a numerically superior, well-organized social group with interests hostile to one's own, it is predictable that the sentiment of alienation or disenfranchisement from the political system would motivate many citizens to abandon, or even revolt against the mechanisms of interest-tabulation.<sup>199</sup> Indeed, these forms of social upheaval and rebellion are on display today in a variety of polities characterized by deep ethnic or religious rifts that continue across generations, from Iraq and the Sudan, to the multiple nation states of the Americas that are perpetually struggling to come to terms with the history of indigenous-colonist relations.

The cohesion and survival of the democratic process, it would seem, thus depends upon securing a firmer purchase upon the loyalties and motivations of a diverse body of citizens. In 1927, it was John Dewey who gave the classic formulation of the legitimating, integrative force of discussion, debate, and deliberation within the democratic polity. Although the ballot might provide the technical means to allow a public to express the balance of its perceived interests, Dewey argued, "what is more significant is that counting of heads compels prior recourse to methods of discussion, consultation, and persuasion."<sup>200</sup> The public conversation that precedes a democratic ballot provides the opportunity for citizens to voice their respective opinions, to test out one another's arguments, to persuade one another of their position's merits, and potentially even to change one another's minds. Without this open door of mutual persuasion, it becomes difficult to imagine why citizens whose beliefs or interests frequently run contrary to those of a stable majority would engage in the democratic process at all, or why power-wielding groups would ever bother to justify their favored policies before the larger public. Although individual citizens undoubtedly possess a variety of idiosyncratic reasons for participating in democratic politics, it seems that without the viable opportunity for each and all to engage in the process of a public conversation in which they can hope to affect policy on matters of mutual concern,

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<sup>199</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 16.

<sup>200</sup> Dewey, "The Public and Its Problems," 365.

the public support and legitimacy that underwrites the democratic process would disintegrate.

Taking their cue from Dewey's valorization of public discussion as the heart of democratic politics, Gutmann and Thompson have developed a careful analysis of how the widespread adoption of certain dispositions and skills of deliberation are necessary to aid a democratic polity cope with diversity and political disagreement. Gutmann and Thompson's starting point is in effect the situation just examined: modern democracies are characterized by the persistence of deep and recalcitrant disagreement between citizens of diverse moral, cultural, and political backgrounds. Some of the sources of disagreement are common to all societies insofar as they are elements of the "human condition" itself: inhabitants of a shared social space, no matter what the state of their political organization, are bound to find themselves at odds with one another in competing over scarce resources or in confronting the limits of one another's generosity.<sup>201</sup> Other sources of conflict are more uniquely endemic to democratic polities: the incompatibility of moral values between different cultural groups, combined with the inability to decide which set of moral values is objectively right, provokes situations of *moral* disagreement in which one segment of the public cannot deign to accept the policies or principles proffered by another.<sup>202</sup> The legality of abortion stands as Gutmann and Thompson's most striking example of this phenomenon of moral disagreement, but of course the same brand of divisive mutual unacceptability is also visible in disputes over affirmative action, capital punishment, animal rights, and wealth redistribution—all issues which can only be resolved in a way that will inevitably offend one party's deep-seated moral sensibilities. The ubiquity of these forms of disagreement, argue Gutmann and Thompson, points us towards the necessity of strengthening deliberative practices.

But how is an intensification of discussion expected to resolve the problem of incompatible values?

On the surface, it might seem that continuing discussion of matters subject to seemingly irresolvable

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<sup>201</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 21. This point is of course made most famously by Hobbes, but Gutmann and Thompson contend *contra* Hobbes that the self-interested motivations at the root of these conflicts are not the entirety of the human psyche.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.



moral disagreement would only serve to refresh the vigor of the moral opposition, reminding citizens perpetually of their intractable disagreements. Reasoned argumentation about abortion, for example, has yet to produce a mutually acceptable policy solution or inspire a massive exodus of partisans from one camp to another; in fact it arguably has only served to intensify the hostility and frustration that pervades the controversy, prompting extreme partisans to resort from time to time to desperate measures. Gutmann and Thompson acknowledge this danger, but they also point out that the alternatives to supporting ongoing deliberation—transferring the power of decision to a panel of experts, or silencing certain forms of dissent by legal decree—not only also fail to resolve the moral heart of the conflict, they further alienate some portion of the citizenry from the political process all together. On the other hand, Gutmann and Thompson argue that ongoing deliberation gives citizens an avenue to constantly review ruling opinions and to try and persuade their fellows of the rightness of their particular position; it gives them the opportunity to seek out compromise or less-objectionable legal solutions; and it encourages citizens at the very least to see the reasonableness of one another's views, if not their veracity. "Insofar as deliberation is missing in political life, citizens also lack a mutually justifiable way of living with their ongoing moral disagreements," but within the context of deliberation, "they express and respect their status as political equals even as they continue to disagree."<sup>203</sup>

Deliberative democracy thus promotes social cohesion and pacifies internal moral divisions, as John Dewey recognized, by giving the minority party in any one particular dispute "the relative satisfaction...that over time it may be successful in becoming a majority."<sup>204</sup> Where argumentation replaces force or unreflective aggregation of votes, one always has hope that better reasons can be found to convince the opposition to take up one's own position. Even more importantly, Gutmann and Thompson argue that deliberation further promotes the mutual respect that citizens afford one another when they are able to view their opponents' opinions as *justifiable*. Constant exposure to the stresses

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>204</sup> Dewey, "The Public and Its Problems," 366.

of public debate forces a partisan to find reasons in support of his position that are mutually compelling for all, encouraging all parties to the debate to cultivate a common ground of shared principle from which they can begin to address their disagreements. Alongside the pacifying effect that deliberation produces by ushering disputes into the province of rational persuasion, therefore, deliberation also performs a justificatory function, providing citizens the grounds to affirm the legitimacy or reasonableness of decisions they might nevertheless disagree with. “Deliberative democracy promises only provisionally justified decisions, but they are justifiable to all citizens who are bound by them.”<sup>205</sup>

Of course, actual functioning democratic debate frequently falls far short of the aspirations set for it by deliberative theorists, with partisans refusing to recognize anything but evil in their opponents’ positions and with deceit and manipulation in evidence as much as reasoned argumentation. The departure of reality from the ideal, however, is not in itself sufficient cause to abandon the concept of the deliberative public, and indeed deliberative theorists have more often viewed this disparity as a catalyst for action. John Dewey again set the program for this theoretical discourse with his call for a *reconstruction* of the public rather than an abandonment of it: “The essential need in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion.”<sup>206</sup> At the cutting edge of the project of public reconstruction, therefore, deliberative theorists turn to education as a primary tool for developing deliberative dispositions. But as we shall quickly see, the thick moral dispositions of reciprocity and public reasonableness required for robust deliberative practice do not automatically command the assent of all parties invested in educational pursuits; the deliberative ideal might call for moral resources that the public as presently formed cannot—or will not—provide.

### §1.1 Education for Deliberation

The democratic educational paradigm quite intentionally leaves a broad range of pedagogical and

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<sup>205</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 51.

<sup>206</sup> Dewey, “The Public and Its Problems,” 366.

curricular matters open to the decisions of the deliberating public: whether students may be excused from particularly controversial curricular programs; at what age students might choose to drop out; what types of disciplinary authority ought to be granted to teachers, etc. Nevertheless, the democratic paradigm does not grant unlimited scope to the fluctuating pedagogical aims of a dynamic public sphere, for the reproduction and maintenance of the public sphere itself will require that the rising generation of citizens is equipped with the habits, skills, and dispositions requisite for effective participation in civic discourse. While the task of elaborating a comprehensive curricular model for education is a project that must properly be undertaken within the context of particular democratic communities themselves, democratic theorists can nevertheless aspire to decipher a set of principles that articulate the general requirements of political reproduction that will allow the public to negotiate competing educational claims and social interests into the future.

Following her commitment to a deliberative model of democratic practice, Amy Gutmann suggests a set of educational requirements that are derived reflexively from the developmental interest the public possesses in promoting mutual understanding, reciprocal respect, and equal access. Least controversially, Gutmann proposes the regulatory principle of *non-discrimination* as the primary constraint placed upon the otherwise broad educational authority granted to the democratic public. “For democratic education to support conscious *social* reproduction,” Gutmann explains, “all educable children must be educated.”<sup>207</sup> The constraint of non-discrimination prevents a dominant majority within the public from restricting access to education as a means to reshape the public in its own image via force rather than through reasoned argumentation between political equals.

Beyond this formal constraint aimed at ensuring equal educational access, however, Gutmann also contends that democratic purposes place an additional constraint upon the *content* of the educational process. Gutmann’s thick conception of democratic practice as a deliberative activity prevents her from

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<sup>207</sup> Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 2nd Ed.:45.

endorsing any educational scheme that merely ensures equal educational access; the schools of a democratic society must also attempt to prepare all students for participation in the deliberative activities of the public sphere. This requirement, as Gutmann explains it, implies that children cannot be educated in a way that shuts them off from considering the beliefs and values of other cultures, religions, or social groups generally. Democratic citizenship is founded upon “the freedom to deliberate rationally among all ways of life,” and adults cannot be allowed to restrict the scope of that deliberation in advance by inculcating in children an “uncritical acceptance” of one single way of life.<sup>208</sup> This second principle of constraint that democratic education places upon parental and public authority Gutmann labels a principle of *nonrepression*: the democratic interest in perpetuating public deliberation constrains educational authorities from repressing children’s ability to engage with and criticize multiple conceptions of the good.<sup>209</sup>

As might be anticipated, it is this second principle of nonrepression that has encountered the most resistance in educational debates, with community-minded critics arguing that the activity of “critical deliberation among good lives” encourages children to adopt a stance of skepticism towards all values, including those of their own communities.<sup>210</sup> The charge that democratic education promotes a skeptical disposition in students is one that Gutmann will vigorously deny, but before moving to consider this criticism more carefully, the ideal of “critical deliberation” that the principle of nonrepression protects bears further clarification. Why is it that democratic citizens need to be exposed to the views of other cultures, according to Gutmann, and why must they reflectively consider the claims of those cultures as plausible alternatives to their own ethical background? In her work with

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 2nd Ed.:44–45.

<sup>209</sup> It is important to note that the principle of nonrepression does not forbid degrees of censorship befitting the interests of developing robust deliberation. Elementary students need not be exposed to the ideologies of the Nazi party or of the Klan, even if there are compelling reasons to *eventually* expose them to such anti-democratic doctrines.

<sup>210</sup> Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 2nd Ed.:44. For the communitarian objection, see Stolzenberg, “‘He Drew a Circle That Shut Me Out’: Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education”; Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State.”

Dennis Thompson, Gutmann has given an expansive account both of why critical deliberation is necessary in a pluralist democracy as well as what particular dispositions it requires democratic citizens possess.

The cornerstone virtue of deliberative practice in a pluralist society, according to Gutmann and Thompson, is “reciprocity,” a moral stance maintained by individual citizens that regulates the way they receive the claims of others and cope with disagreements in public discourse. Although citizens rightfully profess personal allegiance to their own comprehensive conception of the good life—a doctrine that might be dictated in part by their religion, their ethnic tradition, their political beliefs, etc.—the conditions of deep value pluralism pervasive in modern societies deny citizens the expectation that all other individuals they encounter in their political, economic, or social spheres will adhere to the same ethical or religious doctrines they themselves live by. Within the sphere of civil society, this “fact of pluralism” effects at least a minimal moral demand that individual tolerate one another’s differing opinions or beliefs in order to enable non-conflictual exchange and interaction. As individuals enter into the political public sphere, however—the realm in which citizens encounter one another as political equals attempting to collectively regulate the conditions of their shared social world—the demands placed upon them increase beyond mere tolerance. In democratic polities, “citizens must cooperate to make their lives go well,” and this means that they must attempt to find a common stock of values and purposes upon which they can begin to cooperate. In its most basic instantiation, therefore, the principle of reciprocity requires that the arguments that citizens make in the public sphere need to be presented in terms mutually acceptable in principle by all. If “you make your claims on terms that I can accept in principle,” then “ I make my claims on terms that you can accept in principle.”<sup>211</sup>

Superficially, it might appear that deliberative reciprocity is purely an intellectual skill; future citizens must be trained in the mental gymnastics of converting their privately held convictions, initially

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<sup>211</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 55.

understood in a contentious and sectarian vernacular, into publicly acceptable propositions elaborated in a secular *lingua franca*. Gutmann and Thompson, however, contend that reciprocity is additionally supported by a set of dispositions or character traits that encourage individuals to seek out reciprocally acceptable arguments in the public sphere. Under the banner of “mutual respect,” they thus enumerate a variety of moral attitudes that they believe necessary for enabling “constructive interaction with...the persons with whom one disagrees.”<sup>212</sup>

Some of these dispositions regulate the way that an individual presents him or herself in the public sphere. As a matter of “civic integrity” a public citizen ought to avoid changing her beliefs to suit different audiences; she ought to seek to conform her actions to the principles she espouses in speech; and she ought to take responsibility for the implications of the positions and policies she supports. Another set of dispositions regulates the way that the individual citizen receives the arguments offered by her fellow citizen in the public sphere. As a matter of “civic magnanimity,” all citizens ought to strive to discover in her opponents’ positions reasons and arguments that she can accept as morally reasonable; she ought to remain open to the possibility that she might be convinced of the rightness of others’ arguments; and she ought to actively seek the most stable common grounds upon which all parties to a dispute might manage their disagreements.<sup>213</sup>

In addition to the intellectual skills required for participation in public debate, therefore, deliberative democracy requires an extensive degree of moral training through which future citizens are encouraged to stand by their own beliefs with integrity and without deceit or manipulation as well as to maintain a respectful attitude and open mind to the positions of their opponents. Deliberative education is not a morally neutral enterprise; it promotes the development of a specific type of moral character at the expense of intolerant, deceitful, or discriminatory modes of life, and it demands that all citizens endorse that character. The modes of life excluded from or disadvantaged within democratic

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<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–85.

education, however, Gutmann contends are merely those that are inconsistent with democratic politics itself; insofar as the democratic polity requires mutual respect between citizens in order to resolve internal disagreements and justify public policies, then the educational practices of the polity may rightfully discourage uncivil habits of disrespect and intolerance.

The moral education of deliberative democracy is thus decidedly non-neutral, but Gutmann and Thompson nevertheless also argue that the moral requirements of deliberative reciprocity are not so demanding as to extinguish genuine value pluralism within democratic society. Reciprocity does not require of citizens that they abandon their privately held religious convictions or cultural beliefs; nor does it ask them to justify through public reasons their desire to abide by their private convictions even in the face of dramatic cultural, scientific, and economic change.<sup>214</sup> To the contrary, the underlying presupposition of Gutmann and Thompson's model of democratic practice runs in precisely the opposite direction: individuals are expected to live by their own idiosyncratic conceptions of the good, to pass them on to their children, and to keep their robust cultural life alive. It is only when citizens must collectively decide how to handle matters of mutual concern—adopting a single principle or course of action that will affect the lives of all—that the demands of civic reciprocity come into effect. By allowing maximum scope for cultural pluralism within a democratic society, deliberative democrats thus hope to avoid the charge of “civic totalism” often leveled (rightly or wrongly) against both classical civic republicans and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic theory of John Dewey.<sup>215</sup> Deliberation is not designed to produce a comprehensive doctrine for all citizens to endorse; citizens are not expected to work towards the alignment of all of their interests; a democratic society is not an organic unity of shared belief. Democracy is a deliberative mechanism for a pluralist society to confront problems of mutual concern through rational and non-coercive practices. Nevertheless, it is precisely over the question of

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>215</sup> Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 2nd Ed.:13–14; Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*, 139–144; Ravitch, “Education and Democracy.”

pluralism that deliberative democracy, and its attendant educational project, has encountered some of its most vexing criticisms.

## **§2 Challenges to Reciprocity**

Despite Gutmann and Thompson's contention that deliberative reciprocity is a political practice friendly to diversity, and one that citizens of all backgrounds and creeds ought to be able to endorse and participate in, a number of critics have raised questions concerning the compatibility of an educational program aimed at promoting reciprocity with the cultural dynamism of modern democratic societies. At the center of these criticisms is the frequent concern that, by training young individuals to engage in politics solely within the space of publicly acceptable reasons and values, deliberative education places an artificial—and harmful—boundary between democratic politics and the valuable resources of solidarity and existential meaning that are generated out of citizens' specific cultural, religious, or ethical milieus. Although it is sectarian conviction that organizes private life and that often motivates an individual's highest personal aspirations, deliberative reciprocity asks citizens to bracket those privately held religious, moral, or cultural commitments out of their political claims, relying instead upon the stock of publicly accessible reasons used as currency in the public sphere. While Gutmann and Thompson perceive in the deliberative virtue of reciprocity an admirable way for citizens to maintain their firmly held convictions privately while publicly seeking mutually acceptable solutions to shared social problems, others see a potential homogenization of political beliefs, a liquidation of traditional comprehensive belief systems, and a draining of deep sources of political motivation.<sup>216</sup> Is it necessary for democratic education to train young citizens to cordon their privately held, comprehensive belief systems out of the sphere of public debate? Or does this educational process overburden the ethical resources of the citizenry?

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<sup>216</sup> Habermas, "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure," 490; Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*, 33; Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd Ed.:214.



One of the most persistent lines of criticism directed at the educational program of civic reciprocity has focused on the problem of how deliberative education affects young citizens' political *motivation*, for as many theorists have held, the active political participation in the political public sphere that is so vital to the success of self-governing polities is often dependent upon prior sources of motivation rooted in firmly held sectarian convictions.<sup>217</sup> While civic reciprocity might be the ideal disposition for citizens to adopt while negotiating cooperative responses to shared problems, it is often the non-public, non-reciprocal beliefs of religion, culture, and communal obligation that prompt individuals to enter into the political sphere in the first place. Small, ethically unified sectarian communities are frequently the initial source of an individual's sense of collective obligation, and they provide citizens with a comprehensive ethical perspective that serves as a constant guide and reference as they engage in the wide-ranging problems of the public sphere. Furthermore, these sectarian communities often serve as a crucial source of support and affirmation for individuals engaged in a difficult political struggle against majoritarian beliefs and practices.<sup>218</sup> Even though successful deliberation under conditions of diversity requires individuals to extend themselves outside of the sphere of private conviction and to seek mutually acceptable terms of public cooperation, the political participation of most citizens depends in fundamental ways upon non-public resources of identity, community, and ethical belief.

Michael Sandel points to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s as a powerful example of how the normative and communal resources of sectarian religious belief are a catalyzing force for democratic politics, even though the content of those beliefs might never serve as a reciprocal source of democratic legitimation.<sup>219</sup> In the case of groups like the SCLC and SNCC, the values, goals, and principles asserted by the groups' leadership were frequently drawn directly from sectarian interpretations of religious scripture, and although their rhetoric might not have met the standard of

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<sup>217</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. Arendt's discussion of the restorative function of private life in relation to the contest of politics. Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>219</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*.

reciprocal public accessibility, it did nevertheless provide for many individuals the spiritual and moral motivation needed to shake off decades of political powerlessness and engage in direct political action. It is hard to imagine what set of publicly accessible, non-sectarian reasons would have been capable of motivating so many individuals to face imprisonment, violence, and social ostracism in order to confront the gross social injustices perpetuated by an entrenched political majority. The political claims of Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. of course could be translated into the language of public reason, as the adept legal maneuvering of Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP throughout the '50s had proven, but the messianic overtone of King's rhetoric was nevertheless an indispensable source of moral inspiration that gave long-oppressed communities the courage to face harassment and violence, all in the name of a precarious cause they hoped an openly hostile public would eventually come to accept as just.

Defenders of deliberative education might point out here that there is nothing within the deliberative program that would prevent individuals from appealing to non-reciprocal or sectarian beliefs as a means to motivate political participation within their own private confessional communities. Indeed, the deliberative educational model allows extensive leeway for cultural or religious groups to inculcate in their children robust commitment to sectarian conceptions of the good life or the blessed community; deliberative education only requires that the students' political preparation encourage them to leave behind the contentious language of their faith or creed when they enter into the public sphere, phrasing their political claims instead in the publicly accessible language of rights, liberties, and the common good.

We might nevertheless wonder, however, whether this psychic division between private conviction and publicly expressed reasons does not still exercise a dampening effect, despite the best intentions of deliberative educators. Children's identities, after all, are but an unstable source of moral and ethical motivations, and community-minded theorists like Sandel worry that an educational program that drops

youth too soon into culturally unstructured space of public reason will only serve to disorient and confound their as yet inchoate political strivings. If the motivating impulse for individual citizens to engage in public debate emerges out of the private lives of community or the deep religious and cultural sources of ethical conviction, then we might reasonably expect that children and youth even more than adults will depend upon untranslated sectarian language to articulate their most passionately felt political claims. Might it not be the case that the filter of reciprocity that deliberative education places between the private and the public will be a discouraging source of friction, slowing or preventing some youth from presenting their beliefs and values to the public at large?

Political engagement is always a risky venture that opens the individual citizen to criticism, argument, and even public loss of face, and citizens understandably seek to surround themselves with a community of solidarity and affirmation before they enter into the public arena. Theorists as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and William Connolly have accordingly all emphasized the need for engaged political participants to draw energy and support from a non-public realm of community, family, or friendship.<sup>220</sup> When citizens are too rigorously dissuaded from bringing their thick ethical commitments into the public sphere, and when too many stipulations are placed upon their political participation, they potentially lose hold of the fragile threads of encouragement and support that gave them the fortitude to expose themselves to the public eye in the first place. Young citizens in particular are already reluctant to engage in the adult world of political contest, and an educational program that gives them the impression that only “filtered” arguments can be espoused in public serves to increase their intimidation.

The negative effects of a purely secularized political education, however, might be traced even further: as Michael Sandel has argued, “a politics that brackets morality and religion too thoroughly soon generates disenchantment,” provoking some cultural minorities or dissident groups to enter into a

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<sup>220</sup> This point is vastly elaborated upon in the work of Arendt and Foucault. Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Foucault, *Le Gouvernement De Soi Et Des Autres*.

self-imposed social isolation, disconnecting themselves from the political sphere all together.<sup>221</sup> The segregation of private ethical values from public political reasons, in other words, is not responsible merely for a lower rate of political participation; it might also generate an active *hostility* on the part of some groups towards the unwelcoming play of secular rationality in politics. William Connolly has likewise confirmed this hypothesis in his work on secularism, arguing that the exclusion of religious or cultural doctrines from political debate only serves to force such political doctrines underground to emerge at a later date in a more vitriolic mood. Although deliberative democrats aim to pacify public discourse, their exclusion of the “visceral register” of religious and communal attachments antagonizes a large portion of the public who would rather give up on democracy than give up on speaking the native language of their existential faith.<sup>222</sup>

Given Gutmann’s concern for reconstructing democratic education as an inclusive enterprise of social cooperation, one might expect that the concerns raised by Sandel, Connolly, and others—namely, the concern that a strict interpretation of the demands of civic reciprocity might provoke a crisis of demotivation or disenchantment with democratic practice—would force a careful revision of her educational program. To the contrary, however, Gutmann finds the critique of democratic education’s motivational deficit unconvincing. She insists that all non-repressive systems of private belief ought to be susceptible to translation into the reciprocally accessible terms of public reason, and, while it is the job of non-public communities of conscience to inculcate in children deep sources of religious or ethical motivation, she refuses to accept that any legitimizable set of motivating beliefs is put at a disadvantage by having children learn how to express those beliefs in publicly accessible language.<sup>223</sup> The religiously rooted claims of the Civil Rights movement, for example, were readily translatable into the secular political language of equal rights, and teaching young children to think about racial equality in these

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<sup>221</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd Ed.:216–217.

<sup>222</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 4–7.

<sup>223</sup> Gutmann, “Civic Education and Social Diversity.”

terms does not prevent them from finding continuing motivations in the language of Christian brotherhood and redemption.

The only instance in which Gutmann allows that a private doctrine or motivation might indeed be actively undermined by an education in civic reciprocity is in those cases where the doctrine in question is in fact incompatible with the central tenets of democratic society (non-repression, non-domination) or with the moral attitude of reciprocal respect that undergirds that society. Thus, a neo-Nazi might find the work of reciprocal translation onerous if not impossible, because there simply is no publicly accessible set of scientific data or reciprocally acceptable set of moral principles to justify his discriminatory views. In these particular cases, however, Gutmann argues that the burdens on this private belief system are acceptable because a democratic society is justified in seeking the extinction of such beliefs; insofar as repressive or discriminatory doctrines undermine the democratic project of rational cooperation, they ought to be discouraged as much as possible.

The refusal of reciprocity in education is a special subset of the more general refusal to engage in democratic reason-giving, and Gutmann utilizes the *Mozert v. Hawkins* case examined in the last chapter to demonstrate why, in her view, there can likewise be no compelling democratic reason to allow some children to be educated without training in reciprocity. In the *Mozert case*, conservative Christian parents, dedicated to raising their children according to a literalist (although selective) reading of scripture, objected to the public school system's attempt to make their children familiar with cultural traditions other than their own or to introduce their children to basic democratic moral values. The evangelical parents of Hawkins County, Tennessee saw no redeeming benefit in the public school's multicultural reading curriculum, explicitly designed as it was to prepare children for political participation and general interaction with all members of the society they were born into.<sup>224</sup> Rather than viewing the democratic curriculum as a chance to empower their children or to equip them to

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

cooperatively steer the development of their society into the future, these parents viewed political preparation purely as a corrosive influence that would distract their children from the true end of the good life—eternal salvation as defined by their religious community.<sup>225</sup>

Because the Mozert parents saw no need to justify their educational aspirations to the larger public, and because they rejected the practice of reciprocity as a corrosive influence on their faith and their prospects for salvation, these parents had withdrawn from the most basic commitment to civic cooperation and “conscious social reproduction” that was supposed by Gutmann to serve as a consensual foundation for public educational practice. In refusing to explain their political or educational views in reciprocally accessible ways, the Mozert parents pass the limits of Gutmann’s conciliatory sympathies. She writes, with Thompson,

...a deliberative perspective does not address people who reject the aim of finding fair terms of social cooperation; it cannot reach those who refuse to press their public claims in terms accessible to their fellow citizens. No moral perspective in politics can reach such people, except one that replicates their own comprehensive set of beliefs.<sup>226</sup>

Gutmann thus views the intransigence of the Mozert parents—and presumably the intransigence of other isolationist groups as well—as predominantly a *moral* failing that makes their worldviews irredeemable for democratic inclusion. Because they refuse to consider the validity of the views of others on principle, and because they refuse even to attempt to explain their own views to others in ways accessible to the uninitiated, the Mozert parents are simply beyond the pale of rational democratic discourse. Although Gutmann concedes that a democratic society ought to *tolerate* the isolationist impulses of such communities so long as they remain relatively benign, she sees no reason why a democratic society ought to give their views any weight when formulating the broad social goals of

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<sup>225</sup> “Mozert V. Hawkins County School Board,” 1058.

<sup>226</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 55.

education.<sup>227</sup>

Gutmann's condemnation of non-reciprocity, however, depends wholly upon the debatable assumption that there can be no democratically legitimizable reasons for refusing to engage in reciprocal reason-giving or to refuse to translate one's cultural views into publicly accessible reasons. The only motivation there might be to refuse reciprocity, on Gutmann's account, are motivations that are hostile to the practice of democratic life itself and thus unworthy of political recognition or protection. Indeed, the Mozert parents' extreme isolationism and anti-modernism serves as a perfect illustration and confirmation of Gutmann's assumptions about individuals' motivations for refusing reciprocity, for in their pre-trial depositions these parents display an abiding hostility towards all social groups other than their own.<sup>228</sup> Nevertheless, the Mozert case is but one extreme example of the rejection of reciprocity, and merely because non-reciprocity in this instance is paired with open hostility towards democratic pluralism as such does not necessarily mean that non-reciprocity is essentially or in every instance incompatible with democratic life.

In using the Mozert case as the primary exemplar of non-reciprocity, Gutmann, I believe, neglects to explore the full panoply of reasons that a particular cultural community or political group might refuse to present their views in publicly accessible reasons or that they might seek to exempt their children from having to master the language of public reason. Indeed, I believe it is possible to find positive examples of communities that might have legitimate reasons for strategically rejecting the educational program of reciprocity, depending upon the general political climate they find themselves located within; and furthermore, the political or moral perspectives sheltered and nurtured through such strategic acts of non-reciprocity might be of invaluable import to the development of democratic politics itself. However, it is difficult to understand the isolationist impulse sympathetically as long as we take

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<sup>227</sup> Gutmann, "Civic Education and Social Diversity," 577.

<sup>228</sup> See in particular Vicki Frost's argument that her children could be taught the views of other religions only if they were simultaneously "instructed of the error of the other philosophy." "Mozert V. Hawkins County School Board," 1064.

the *Mozert* parents as the sole spokespersons of the trend, and if there are grounds for allowing—even supporting—political non-reciprocity, we must locate alternate examples that offer tolerant, even democratic reasons for seeking exemption from the rigors of deliberative education.

### *§2.1 Democratic Reasons for Non-Reciprocity*

One of the most compelling accounts of how the refusal of reciprocity might be understood as something other than a moral failing—and thus as a potentially reasonable political-educational demand—has been articulated by William Galston, who has argued that the strict deliberative requirement that all political claims be presented purely in publicly accessible reasons might have the unfortunate effect of screening certain politically urgent (though untimely and unpopular) perspectives out of public debate all together. In support of removing the requirement of reciprocity from the scheme of democratic education, Galston notes that Gutmann and Thompson’s robust conception of deliberative reciprocity, when strictly applied, would apparently have disallowed a number of historic political claims from ever entering the public sphere at all, even though those claims were directly responsible for expanding the sphere of democratic inclusion. The abolitionist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, was grounded in an idiosyncratic interpretation of Biblical scripture that ran against the prevailing theological, scientific, and political beliefs of the day, but which nevertheless served as an essential source of support for the abolitionist belief in the moral equality of the races.<sup>229</sup>

Galston’s point is not simply that the abolitionist’s claims were unpopular, or even that they encountered vigorous resistance and disagreement in their own time; mere lack of popularity is a condition that afflicts all minority political beliefs, and it does not, according to deliberative theory, serve as grounds to exclude an argument from reciprocal political consideration. Both majority and minority arguments alike must be translated into reasons mutually accessible by all parties within the

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<sup>229</sup> Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*, 114–115. The example is used to similar effect by Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd Ed.:198–202.



democratic public, and on this common ground of public reason the arguments can be evaluated on their merits. Galston's point, however, is that the abolitionists' minority arguments were not even susceptible to translation and re-presentation according to the terms of debate dominant within the public sphere of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America; that is, their claims were inherently unrepresentable in reciprocal terms. Although the work of the abolitionist movement led inexorably towards the expansion of suffrage and the opening of public discourse to more diverse perspectives, in their own time the abolitionists possessed no reciprocally accessible reasons to advance their agenda.

Because African slaves were viewed as less-than-human, both from a scientific and a political point of view, the abolitionist movement could not simply appeal to publicly accessible values of equality, individual rights, or political inclusion. Each of these principles applied only to those beings already included in the sphere of humanity, and thus to expand the scope of the democratic public, the abolitionists had first to prove their humanity. But what arguments would support this conclusion within the sphere of reasonable discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The abolitionists made direct empirical assertions about the equality of intellectual abilities across the races and about the descent of Africans and Europeans alike from a common ancestor, but none of these claims were confirmable by the accepted methods and doctrines of the science of the day. The scientific evidence has of course since redeemed the theory of common ancestry and discredited the supposition of intellectual inferiority, but there could have been no way to have known this conclusion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lacking credible empirical evidence, at least according to the reigning scientific standards, the abolitionists grounded their assertions concerning equality upon a sectarian theological doctrine—one derived, moreover, from a then-contentious reading of a well-known Biblical narrative.

More specifically, the abolitionists interpreted the creation story of Genesis against the popular readings of the day to support the idea that all humans, black or white, were made in the image of God; the different 'races' of the planet were all descendant from a single creation event. This egalitarian

doctrine was not only heterodox from a theological point of view; it was also in direct conflict with the then-current scientific theory of polygenesis, championed by Harvard academic Louis Agassiz and supposedly confirmed through studies of the scant fossil record. Agassiz's theory insisted upon the discrete origins of each human race in separate creation events, and he argued that the origin story of the Bible only recounted the history of the White European race.<sup>230</sup> If the abolitionists could produce alternative fossil evidence or physiological studies--publicly accessible evidence--then their beliefs could easily have been supported through the give and take of public reasons. But the abolitionist belief in equality rested wholly upon an article of faith, and this was an argument that could thus not have been weighed, criticized, or even understood by all parties to public discourse; to understand the abolitionists' position as even hypothetically acceptable, one had to act on faith that one particular interpretation of one particular religious scripture provided sufficient grounds for overturning prevalent racial attitudes, discrediting scientific studies, and abolishing the long-standing economic practice of chattel slavery.

In the example of the abolitionist movement, we thus find an example of non-reciprocity that counters Gutmann's examples and provides evidence of an inherently democratic rationale for refusing reciprocal reason-giving. The abolitionists did not refuse the publicly accessible standards of science or selected portions of the Constitution out of general hostility or malevolence towards the democratic public; to the contrary, their refusal of reciprocity was motivated out of a desire to expand the sphere of democratic discourse and to force the public to recognize the exigent social and moral problems surrounding the practice of slavery. Because there existed no set of reasons and arguments to advance their democratic agenda other than contentious theological doctrines, however, the abolitionists strategically exempted their views on slavery from translation into public reason. Accordingly, it seems that in retrospect, it would have been reasonable, even morally praiseworthy, for an abolitionist parent

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<sup>230</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*.

to insist that her child not be required to adopt an attitude of complete civic reciprocity towards the dominant political majority. The demand that the child of an abolitionist family learn to phrase all of her political claims in publicly accessible terms would teach the child, by implication, that her religious community's belief in racial equality had no place in the political sphere. A parent's rejection of education for reciprocity would thus not necessarily be an indication that the parents lacks the moral disposition of civic respect necessary to engage in democratic life, for the parent might have a superseding concern for the maintenance of a particular moral point of view occluded within contemporary debate. If an education in civic reciprocity would instruct a child to view her community's most fervently held moral or political beliefs as inappropriate for inclusion in public discourse, a parent might reasonably seek to instruct her child in non-reciprocal political behaviors that inject marginalized perspectives into the public conversation.

Galston's example, therefore, demonstrates the potential reasonableness of the parental objection to limiting political education to reciprocal deliberation and it confirms the reality of the motivational problem within reciprocity highlighted by Sandel. Contra Gutmann, some parents' choice to reject reciprocity is not necessarily indicative of a lack of moral respect for one's fellow citizens or hostility towards the democratic project itself; indeed, it might reflect the preeminently democratic hope that radically heterodox beliefs might contain perspectives vital for the continuing reformation of political life. In this sense, Galston's example does much more than offer a justification of the occasional reasonableness of non-reciprocal attitudes in education; it further gives a positive account of why non-reciprocity, within limits, might be a beneficial resource that democracies have an interest in sheltering. Non-reciprocal reason-giving, rather than being an aberrant and hostile form of political engagement, might in fact be useful and beneficial for the reconstructive purposes of democratic politics; the example thus potentially gives democrats good reason not simply to allow departures from the paradigm of reciprocity, but further to alter the purportedly necessary moral foundations of democratic education.

Although Gutmann's aim of promoting social harmony and political stability through reciprocal reason-giving might be a desirable aspiration in general for democratic practice, only a polity that possessed absolute certainty in the utter transparency and justice of its own public sphere—a certainty that its public sphere possessed no constitutive injustices or fundamental omissions—would discourage or forbid its citizens from drawing on publicly inaccessible beliefs to present radical challenges to the status quo. I believe I am not alone in shying away from the moral certitude that would permit a pedagogical elimination of non-reciprocal reason-giving from the practice of democracy, for there are after all still many political struggles today in which sectarian, publicly *inaccessible* reasons are used to demand an expansion of democratic inclusion or to highlight experiences of injustice currently occluded from the exchange of reasons in the public sphere.

In the environmental movement, to cite one particular example, the revision of the dominant human-nature relation is motivated in some sectors by a very public appeal to distinctively non-public values found within various cultural and religious traditions. From a reinterpretation of the Judeo-Christian notion of "dominion" found in the Book of Genesis, to the classic Transcendentalist ethical ideals of simplicity and self-reliance, and the famous Iroquois principle of the seventh generation, non-public (that is to say, *private* or *culturally specific*) ethical concepts have been adapted with great skill by some political actors as tools for criticizing dominant legal or cultural norms, shifting in the process the boundaries of the common ground upon which democratic deliberation takes place. Although prior to the mid-twentieth century, there were few legal or political avenues for the public to contemplate the values of biological diversity, ecological health, or species preservation, the infusion of non-public ethical doctrines into public debate has forced even unsympathetic parties to reflect upon the occlusion of environmental value by the present regime of public reason. Non-reciprocal reason-giving has provided distinctively environmental values their first chance to enter the sphere of public

accessibility.<sup>231</sup>

Gutmann's unflagging belief in the moral necessity of reciprocal reason-giving as a means for promoting civic understanding and democratic legitimacy focuses educational energies on a lofty political aspiration; but when the moral ideal of reciprocal public discourse is translated into a rigid demand of the democratic curriculum, it runs the risk of effacing deep seated sources of religious, cultural, or ethical meaning. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, warning against the expulsion of sectarian religious beliefs from political conversation:

...the democratic state should not over-hastily reduce the polyphonic complexity of the range of public voices, for it cannot be sure whether in doing so it would not cut society off from scarce resources for generating meanings and shaping identities. Especially regarding vulnerable domains of social life, religious traditions have the power to provide convincing articulations of moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions.<sup>232</sup>

We cannot demand that all cultural sub-groups be willing to translate their ethical ideals and political contentions into the language of public reasons for the sake of social cooperation, because we can never be certain that the current configuration of public reasons accepted in the public sphere is a perfectly transparent tool for representing and criticizing the problems of our dynamic social experience. A lack of reciprocity is thus not always a sign of a moral failing on the part of the speaker; it can also indicate the appearance of deep moral insight, of communal solidarity, or of vital personal resolve within the political conversation. In this sense, the democratic polity perhaps even depends for its survival upon the frequent shocks delivered by non-reciprocal perspectives or publicly inaccessible claims—seemingly uncooperative political assertions that nevertheless contribute to the political project by highlighting new social problems or injustices occluded by the historical status quo. In the deliberative democratic

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<sup>231</sup> Although the example is mine, the idea of expanding the set of publicly accessible reasons and arguments is drawn from Habermas. Cf. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 366–373; Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure,” 484.

<sup>232</sup> Habermas, “What Is Meant by a ‘Post-Secular’ Society?: A Discussion on Islam in Europe,” 276–277.

quest to promote mutual justification of political beliefs, Gutmann might too quickly have overlooked these necessary, democratic functions that non-reciprocal beliefs and values might perform.

To reconfigure the project of democratic education to allow and encourage these vital functions of non-reciprocity, however, is not an easy task. Any plausible alternative to Gutmann's theory must walk a narrow line, elucidating the forms of democratic practice that can or even should be non-reciprocal without allowing the public to collapse into the fragmented isolationism that represents the dissolution of collective governance. One promising reconstruction of democratic theory that achieves this delicate balance, I believe, can be found in the work of Jürgen Habermas, whose model of communicative politics divides the labor of social integration between institutionalized procedures of democratic reciprocity and the informal processes of problematization circulating in the public sphere. Habermas does not abandon the lofty ideal of a politically unified republic oriented towards cooperation and mutual understanding, but he recognizes that the moral and cognitive burdens of this ideal can be destructive if they are distributed individually to each and every citizen.<sup>233</sup> Instead of expecting of each citizen a thick moral commitment to engage one's fellow citizens on mutually acceptable terms of public reason, therefore, Habermas focuses the individual's civic obligations upon the narrower pragmatic task of "detecting and identifying new problem situations."<sup>234</sup> This notion of civic "problematization," I believe, offers democratic educators a new, morally unburdened target for orienting their efforts at educational reconstruction.

### **§3 Democratic Citizenship as Problematization**

As Gutmann and Thompson themselves acknowledge, Habermas' pioneering studies of the public sphere and of discourse theory form some of the central pillars of the contemporary theory of

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<sup>233</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 114–118.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

deliberative politics.<sup>235</sup> To give an adequate account of the numerous ways in which his investigations into the philosophy of language, psychological development, and critical sociology inform and support deliberative theory would stretch this inquiry far beyond its present scope. The nature of the stalemate encountered between the educational demands of deliberative reciprocity and the ethical resources of private belief, however, provides us with a specific problem that motivates and directs our turn towards Habermas' theory of democracy. In short, the question to be confronted is whether the moral stance of civic reciprocity—an attitude of mutual respect that demands the translation of all political claims into the universally accessible language of public reason—is a platform commitment all citizens must abide by at risk of undermining the success of democratic politics itself. Is it necessary for all citizens to possess and endorse the moral disposition of civic reciprocity in order for deliberative democracy to avoid disintegrating into a patchwork of mutually suspicious and uncooperative cultural groups?

Habermas provides us with a nuanced perspective on this problem, for the wide-ranging scope of his historical and sociological investigations into the constitution of the public sphere give him the tools to switch back and forth between the third-person analytic discourse of social theory and the first-person participant's perspective of the citizen engaged in public action. At the analytic level, Habermas shares Gutmann and Thompson's concerns with the precarious stability of a public composed of citizens who refuse the practice of reciprocal argumentation and who adopt a purely strategic or self-regarding approach to democratic politics, and he recognizes the need to promote political legitimacy and responsiveness by encouraging public participation in democratic discourse. From the first-person perspective, however, Habermas also grants at least *prima facie* plausibility to the claim that the burdens of translation placed upon ethical and cultural beliefs by the practice of reciprocal public reason-giving might be unnecessarily destructive of certain valuable ethical and political insights fostered through religion and culture.

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<sup>235</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 9.

By switching between these two intertwined perspectives on political action, Habermas is able to reassemble a model of civic commitment that lessens the moral burdens of Gutmann and Thompson's notion of reciprocity without allowing democratic practice to collapse into an activity of hostile and suspicious strategic bargaining. The key to Habermas' solution lies in his understanding that while an individual's endorsement of democratic practice cannot be fabricated from above by the social planner, it can nevertheless be motivated out of the pragmatic concerns the individual possesses in resolving the trans-communal problems of his social experience. What motivates individuals in a democratic society to participate in public discourse as a means of negotiating disputes and disagreements is the pragmatic recognition that certain trans-communal social problems cannot be resolved through the unilateral actions of one person or of one consensual cultural group.

On the surface, this appeal to the pragmatic, problem-driven motivations of the individual actor might appear to abandon the idealistic hopes of deliberative democracy for cooperative social integration in favor of a purely strategic democratic association designed to maximize individual benefit and minimize individual harm. A long tradition of strategic action theorists, stretching from Thomas Hobbes straight through the 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses of economic democracy and rational choice, have followed this path, holding that any proposed scheme for promoting social stability under the conditions of modern pluralism must abandon any hope for fostering mutual understanding and social collaboration between individuals.<sup>236</sup> Absent the existence of archaic "lifeworld" contexts of uniformly shared beliefs and practices, modern society "not only unshackles but requires the self-interested pursuit of one's own success," as Habermas glosses this line of thought.<sup>237</sup> Civil peace can thus only be made possible in such a society by playing the strategic and self-interested motivations of individuals off of one another, allowing them to bargain where their interests align, and deploying the "overawing"

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<sup>236</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*; Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*; Shapiro, "Enough of Deliberation: Politics Is About Interests and Power."

<sup>237</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 26.



power of the state when conflicting interests tempt them to violence. Political institutions are utilized to erect a structure of penalties and benefits—or social checks and balances—that mitigate the inevitably destabilizing forces of competition, misunderstanding, and interpersonal conflict.<sup>238</sup>

Habermas, however, shares with Gutmann and Thompson a set of profound reservations against this strategic solution to the problems of diversity and disagreement within modern societies, and his emphasis on the individual's pragmatic motivations for democratic participation is intended to mark a course significantly different from the theory of strategic integration. Most prominently, Habermas argues that the use of coercion and strategic counterbalancing as the final mechanisms of social stabilization does not provide any strong, internally motivating reasons for individual actors to accept and abide by binding laws or social norms.<sup>239</sup> The coercive power of political authority might efficiently elicit social cohesion and obedience only so long as the threat of legal retribution remains a clear and present danger that cows the individual's asocial instincts, and the lure of strategic bargaining similarly only fosters cooperation so long as better advantages cannot be had on one's own. In both cases, the motive to engage in socially cooperative behavior holds no lasting grip on the loyalties of the individual. The withdrawal, or even the temporary absence, of an immediate coercive threat removes the incentive for individuals to respect one another as social equals and to refrain from violence, manipulation, and deceit, and the shifting sands of strategic interests always incline the individual towards the prospect of better deals to be found elsewhere. Any political system that does not draw on non-coercive and non-strategic resources of consensus and cooperation thus always runs the risk of precipitating a legitimation or motivation crisis. Coercion and bargaining cannot infinitely manufacture the obedience of individuals who do not accept the legitimacy of democratic politics from an internal, normative

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<sup>238</sup> The term is Hobbes'. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 118.

<sup>239</sup> The roots of this shared antagonism to the Hobbesian analysis of society can be traced back to Rousseau's polemic against the idea of the "right" of force. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*.

perspective.<sup>240</sup>

It is this failure of the strategically administered polity to secure social integration—or even to secure the mere stability promised by Hobbes—that prompts Habermas to investigate alternative, internally motivating sources of social cooperation and respect. The strong integrative resource of shared, conventional lifeworld belief is no longer available to modern diverse societies, and the weak integrative power of self-interest and coercion always threatens to founder upon its insurmountable deficit of legitimation. Where might a disintegrating, diverse society turn in order to rally new forces of stability and integration? Habermas believes the best hope for producing a renewed collaboratively stabilized social project resides in the integrative power of communication about shared problems.

“If,” Habermas hypothesizes, “complexes of interaction cannot be stabilized simply on the basis of the reciprocal influence that success-oriented actors exert on one another, then *in the final analysis* society must be integrated through communicative action.”<sup>241</sup> When individuals encounter an emergent problem within their social experience, communicate that problem to other affected parties, and present their evaluative perspectives to one another in a discussion aimed at resolving the shared problem, they move past the weak coordinating force of strategic calculation and are bound together by a new intersubjective force that Habermas identifies as communicative action. Initially, the bond that emerges through such communicative acts of public problematization might closely resemble the strategic bond of parties united temporarily only to achieve some mutually desired benefit, but as the parties to public discourse encounter one another repeatedly and recognize the depth and breadth of the social problems they share in common, their relationship changes. Instead of a temporary, strategic loyalty to one another, parties to ongoing public discussion can come to the realization that they depend upon the continuously open avenues of communication to cope with the circumstances of a complex society. Although these discursively bound individuals cannot fabricate from scratch a new lifeworld,

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<sup>240</sup> Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*.

<sup>241</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 26.

filled with robust ethical orientations and beliefs that would motivate indefinite social cooperation, they can nevertheless commit themselves to a stance of discursive respect and cooperation by virtue of their pragmatic need for continued public discourse. In communication, the partners to discourse encounter one another as equals who must provide arguments, not violence, to support their positions, and they performatively commit themselves to a discursive process of resolving problems of common concern. In short, they agree to abide by the implicit norms of the communicative interaction and to recognize the conclusions of the discursive process as legitimate and at least provisionally binding upon the *socius*.<sup>242</sup>

Communicative action for Habermas thus serves as a post-conventional source of social integration—“post-conventional” because it does not rely upon the shared conventions of unquestioned lifeworld beliefs, but nevertheless “integrative” because it motivates individuals to participate in collective practices of self-governance and to treat their fellow discussants as something more than means to achieving one’s own narrow self-interests.<sup>243</sup> Insofar as an informal public sphere draws individuals into practices of continual deliberation, debate, and the clarification of shared interests, citizens find themselves already involved in a practical project of social cooperation whose continual operation they are reliant upon, and they are thus pragmatically encouraged to listen to one another’s claims with an attitude of communicative respect and to support the basic institutions of democratic self-governance.

The similarities between this Habermasian concept of the integrative force of communication and Gutmann and Thompson’s theory of civic reciprocity run deep. Not only are both theoretical constructs developed in opposition to the *modus vivendi* of aggregative democratic theories, but they both additionally find a reflexively binding source of civic respect and cooperation in the practices of public discourse. Nevertheless, despite these common theoretical affiliations, there remains an important difference between the scope of the commitments these theorists believe that democratic discourse

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>243</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 153–199.

requires citizens to affirm. While Gutmann and Thompson insist that successfully integrating deliberation requires a prior moral commitment to reciprocally translating arguments and beliefs into language accessible by all, Habermas' more pragmatically grounded theory absolves the individual of this robust moral requirement; democratic participants might advance non-reciprocal arguments in the public sphere as they see fit, so long as they recognize the legitimacy of the democratic communicative process itself. The burdens of social integration, in a certain sense, are shifted onto the shoulders of democratic procedure in Habermas' model, while the work of the individual citizen is characterized by the work of pragmatic problem recognition. This division of labor between institutional procedures and the individual work of citizens needs further clarification, and in the following two sections I will fill out this sketch of the relationship that holds between the procedural discourse of democratic institutions and the problematizing work of lifeworld-embedded citizens.

### *§3.1 Reciprocity as an Institutional Obligation*

The key divergence between the Habermasian conception of communicative action as a source of social integration and Gutmann and Thompson's moral theory of civic reciprocity, emerges at the level of the political obligations and expectations placed upon the individual citizen—a domain we might think of generally as encompassing the “ethics of citizenship.”<sup>244</sup> Habermas does not disagree that citizens do in fact owe one another a degree of mutual respect that would preclude discrimination, domination, or suppression of disagreement; nor indeed does he disagree that a stable pluralist democracy must be grounded upon laws and procedures that appeal to norms and reasons that are accessible to all members of the polity. Nevertheless, Habermas recognizes that the individual citizen is motivated to engage in and support the political process not necessarily out of a transcendent moral dedication to understanding the views of his fellow citizens, but more directly because of a pragmatic

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<sup>244</sup> A term used by Habermas to connect certain trends in contemporary deliberative theory with the older traditions of civic republicanism. Cf. Habermas, “Three Normative Models of Democracy.”

recognition of the need for continuing public discourse concerning emergent social problems. Asking citizens to translate all of their problem intuitions and political claims into publicly accessible language, as Gutmann and Thompson do, potentially endangers these basic democratic motivations insofar as it disallows the direct expression of perceived problems in the vernacular ethical language most familiar to an individual. In an effort to preserve the private motivations that draw individuals into democratic life, as well as to encourage all citizens to contribute to the work of highlighting new economic and social problems, Habermas thus transfers the obligation to translate all political claims into the language of public reason from the shoulders of the individual citizen and remakes it into an institutional mandate—from the ethics of citizenship to the procedural architecture of political institutions.

Habermas' decision to "institutionalize" certain core element of citizenship ethics stems in large part from his recognition of the disjunct that persists between the generalized functional goals of the third-person social planner and the concrete first-person ethical perspectives that motivate individual actors in the political sphere. Gutmann and Thompson's conception of civic reciprocity may serve the goals of the social planner who seeks social cohesion as an ultimate priority for the totality of the socius, but it simultaneously neglects the non-reciprocal sources of political motivation that frequently serve as the primary source of encouragement for individual citizens to engage in politics. When citizens are obliged to parse their political claims according to a universally accessible stock of public reasons, there are clearly important functional benefits that accrue to the social project of promoting integration and internal cohesion. If "you make your claims on terms that I can accept in principle," and I reciprocally extend the same translations to you, then the range of public disagreement is automatically constrained, taking irreconcilable differences over spiritual eschatology or aesthetic sensibility, for example, off of the field of political play.<sup>245</sup> The accomplishment of this socially stabilizing limitation of political discourse, however, relies entirely upon the prior acceptance by all citizens of an individual

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<sup>245</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 55.

moral commitment to a demanding form of social cooperation. But upon what grounds can the social theorist expect individual citizens to embrace such a strong commitment to understanding the ethical sensibilities of their fellows, or of representing their own sensibilities in a new language, especially when this commitment might require them to ignore, efface, or at least bracket off the first person ethical intuitions that organize their pre-political lifeworld experience?

If we temporarily bracket the third-person perspective of the social planner and adopt the first-person perspective of the lifeworld-embedded citizen instead—a strategy deployed by Habermas to good effect—then the motivating force of the social analyst’s moral commitment to social stability is quickly overwhelmed by the tangle of concrete and non-universalizable goals and desires that orient the individual’s everyday actions. As even the briefest moments of phenomenological self-reflection reveal, and as the long tradition of hermeneutic sociology confirms, individual lives are rarely, if ever, lived in obeisance to the functional-social concerns of the social planner.<sup>246</sup> The formative lifeworld contexts of individual identities prompt situated actors first and foremost to seek out the idiosyncratic goods that are specified within their ethical worldview. Insofar as the highly abstract political goals of promoting social comity and finding fair terms of social cooperation are incapable of giving direction to a life in and of themselves, they will habitually take the backseat to an individual’s identity-constitutive lifeworld values and motivations.

This existential priority of lifeworld commitments has important consequences for the individual’s mode of political participation, for when individuals are drawn into the sphere of public political interaction, their motivations are often predictably drawn from the non-public values of their private lifeworld experience rather than from abstract moral duties to sociability and mutual respect. Citizens do not immediately experience wide scale social problems as statistically significant phenomena plaguing their social system on the whole, but rather as obstacles to the attainment of their individually

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<sup>246</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 153–199; Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

chosen life pursuits. “Systemic deficiencies are experienced in the context of individual life histories,” Habermas explains, and “it is against the life-historical background of violated interests and threatened identities that the effects of deficient system integration are first experienced as pressing problems.”<sup>247</sup> Individuals are motivated to engage in public discourse when they encounter a specific conflict with the manner that the government, the economy, or some other social actor interacts with their particular lifeworld, and the individual’s initial interpretation of this problematic situation will thus inevitably be colored by the existential goals immanent to the lifeworld context the problem arises within.

From the first-person participant’s perspective, therefore, Gutmann and Thompson’s requirement that all individuals translate their political claims into the universally accessible language of public reasons arises as an onerous second-order moral obligation external to the lifeworld experiences that initially and usually motivate political participation. Gutmann and Thompson presume that individuals will recognize the abstract duty of public reason-giving as a matter of obligatory reciprocal respect—I extend to you that which I expect you to extend to me—but this presumption seems to underestimate both the singular motivating force of lifeworld identities as well as the burdens that the activity of translating between lifeworld and public reasons places upon the shoulders of the individual citizen.<sup>248</sup> Especially in those situations in which the ethical content of a claim is not susceptible to presentation in the language of public reason (as in the historical case of the abolitionist movement, or the more contemporary case of radical ecology) or those situations in which certain speakers themselves are outright excluded from reciprocal recognition (the Civil Rights movement and the women’s movement), it would seem that the lifeworld motivations of an individual committed to these causes would run entirely contrary to the obligations of reciprocity. At the very least, such a requirement would discourage many citizens from particularly religious or communalist backgrounds from participating in the political sphere, reducing “the polyphonic complexity of public voices” and potentially cutting

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<sup>247</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 365, 351.

<sup>248</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*.

society off from “key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.”<sup>249</sup>

Habermas believes it is possible to overcome the motivational gap that separates the lifeworld identities of individual civic actors and the systemic need for stability and political cooperation, but he argues forcefully that this gap cannot be bridged by way of an administrative solution that attempts to generate new moral motivations within lifeworlds. Deliberative educational programs attempt to fill the motivational deficit by administratively cultivating dispositions of reciprocity and public reasonability within new generations, but as Habermas accurately foresaw in the 1970s, such attempts at generating systemic needs by way of institutional interventions into lifeworld domains always run the risk of overextending the legitimacy of governmental action.<sup>250</sup> The cultivation of new ethical dispositions—whether they be politically or personally valenced—must always draw initial impetus from and find ongoing support in the lifeworld motivations of social actors, and they cannot be imposed from without.

To meet the social-systemic needs for integration, stability, and cooperation without violating the integrity of lifeworld motivations, Habermas thus seeks to unburden the political practices of individual citizens from some of the heavier moral and cognitive demands placed upon them by deliberative theory and shift those demands instead to the institutional level. We cannot “expect of *all* citizens that they also justify their political statements independently of their religious convictions or world views,” because such a demand places an “undue *mental and psychological* burden” on those citizens whose worldview runs outside of the mainstream but nevertheless “infuses the very pores of daily life.”<sup>251</sup> Nevertheless, we *can* expect that politicians and other functionaries of governing institutions provide such universally accessible justifications *for* the democratic public, and in exchange for these translation services the diverse body of the citizenry can offer its legitimation of publicly justified actions.

Indeed, the presentation of laws and policies in terms accessible to all citizens is not merely

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<sup>249</sup> Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 10.

<sup>250</sup> Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* Part III, Ch. 5.

<sup>251</sup> Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 8–9.



something that we might expect from institutional bodies; it is a process of justification and legitimation that must be demanded of them. While it is acceptable for the private citizen to enter into the public sphere and offer up political claims firmly rooted in her idiosyncratic belief system, in order to become law or policy those claims must find reciprocally accessible, rational foundations utilizable by state actors. Without this institutional translation into publicly reasonable arguments, the laws and policies of the state become an instrument to effect the will of one particular ethical worldview, and citizens who do not share that worldview will be incapable of assenting to or even acknowledging the legitimacy of such laws.<sup>252</sup> While the individual citizen is exempted from the obligation to phrase all of his political claims in language accessible by all members of the public, the public's recognition of the legitimacy of the communicative process depends upon the results of that process being presented in terms that are accessible to all. The public power of legitimation accordingly provides the compelling incentive for institutional actors to justify their decisions and policies through publicly accessible reasons.

The final result of this procedural solution to the undue individual burdens of public reasoning is a bifurcation in the spheres of political discourse. While "the politics of parliamentary bodies are structured predominantly as a *context of justification*," the broader sphere of non-formalized public discourse forms a "'wild' complex that resists organization as a whole."<sup>253</sup> Within the institutional sphere of political discourse, the arguments and claims offered by participants are subject to censure according to procedural rules and constitutional norms that guarantee that no law or policy can enter into effect (A) that is not *justifiable* in terms of reasons and principles whose validity all citizens can acknowledge and (B) that has been arrived at via coercion, deception, or repression. The social "subsystem" of institutionalized political discourse produces "collectively binding decisions" both by ensuring that all decision-making abides in the final instance by certain normative standards of rational communication as well as by demanding that politicians and public officials justify their arguments

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>253</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 307.

through terms accessible to all citizens.<sup>254</sup> Thus, even when citizens disagree with a particular law, policy, or judgment, they ought to be able to endorse the legitimacy of the administrative action because they understand the reasons others support the decision and they recognize the validity of the procedures by which the decision was reached.

By laying the demand that all political claims be translated into mutually accessible arguments “at the door of politicians,” Habermas greatly loosens the restraints fostered around the political practices of individual citizens.<sup>255</sup> While it will generally be true that those citizens capable of building coalitions behind reciprocally compelling ideals will be more successful in their political efforts, there is no reason to insist that each and every citizen translate their claims into publicly accessible language. The legitimacy of the democratic process of forming collectively binding decisions is not hindered by allowing individuals or groups to make arguments in the “wild complex” of the public sphere that appeal purely to idiosyncratic religious, cultural, or ethical beliefs not recognized by the public at large. Indeed, insofar as such heterodox participants provide the public with “key sources for the creation of meaning and identity,” the public sphere that is unburdened of the strict demands of civic reciprocity is arguably more inclusive, creative, and responsive to the problems of its participants.

### *§3.2 Pragmatic Motivations to Legitimation*

Even though Habermas’ proceduralist conception of democratic discourse greatly unburdens the obligations of the individual citizen—thus assuaging some of the grievances made against deliberative politics in the name of lifeworld cohesiveness—it does not entirely efface the problematic domain of the “ethics of citizenship.” Indeed, to entirely efface that domain would require lifting all civic obligations from the shoulders of the citizenry, returning political theory to the ideal of a purely administered state. On that model, self-regarding citizens incapable of cooperative political action are made subject to the

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<sup>254</sup> Habermas, “Three Normative Models of Democracy,” 250.

<sup>255</sup> Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

managerial dictates of an unregulated state; if citizens cannot coalesce around a public political forum of cooperative communication, then the conclusion is forced upon us that the only means of achieving some degree of social stability must be imposed administratively from without. But this is a Hobbesian solution that Habermas is understandably unwilling to accept.

Even as Habermas denies the need for all citizens to engage in a politics of pure public reasonableness, therefore, he never abandons the democratic insight that political institutions must always remain responsive to the needs, goals, and demands of those citizens subject to their governance. The actions of the state must find their ultimate justification and foundation in the approbation of an active public sphere engaged in open communication and reflexive problematization; the institutions of the democratic state needs the legitimation of the public.<sup>256</sup> But here a difficulty arises for Habermas' democratic theory: without securing a strong moral commitment to reciprocity in advance, how is legitimation possible? Indeed, how is an effective sphere of public discourse possible, for if citizens refuse to engage one another on the plane of mutually accessible reasons and values, how can a strong public capable of coordinating political action ever develop?

Another way to express this potential objection to Habermas' proceduralist model is to inquire into the motivations that will prompt citizens to accept the "institutional threshold" that Habermas establishes between the "wild" public sphere and the formalized structures of official deliberation.<sup>257</sup> If a citizen or community refuses to present their political claims in terms that will be accessible to all of their fellow citizens, and if they refuse to appeal to publicly endorsed values and reasons in the course of informal democratic debate, then why would they accept the sovereignty of such reasons at the institutional level? Whether it is individual citizens who offer reciprocally accessible reasons for their political proposals, or whether it is representatives of individual citizens who do so, the end result is the same: only secular reasons—that is, non-sectarian, extra-lifeworld reasons—can ultimately justify the

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<sup>256</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* Section 8.3.

<sup>257</sup> Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 9–10.

operations of the state. Either way, citizens will have to abandon the hope that the state can become an instrument of their particular community's will, and they will have to be willing to accept legislation that is not crafted immediately out of the values dominant within their lifeworld.

Gutmann and Thompson solved this problem and derived the legitimacy of laws grounded in extra-communal values by demanding a prior moral commitment on the part of individual citizens to understanding or respecting one another's independent belief systems and to seeking out mutually acceptable values between groups.<sup>258</sup> If Habermas does not hypothesize this basic moral attitude as an absolute prerequisite of democratic politics, then it is incumbent upon him to offer another account of the motivations that will plausibly drive lifeworld-embedded actors to accept the legitimacy of the extra-lifeworld decision-making processes of political institutions.

Habermas' response to this problem of civic motivations shows him adopting a surprisingly pragmatic, rather than transcendental, perspective, despite the notoriety of his broader project of clarifying a "quasi-transcendental" foundation for political normativity writ large. That is to say, while Gutmann and Thompson apparently understand the moral disposition of civic reciprocity as a sort of necessary precondition for democratic deliberation, Habermas allows that the inclinations, desires, and values that motivate individual citizens to engage in democratic politics might not find any ultimate ground in an act of pure moral recognition. Indeed, from the historical-sociological perspective adopted by Habermas in some of his key writings on the public sphere, the attempt to enshrine an individualized moral commitment to reciprocity as a necessary *prerequisite* for engagement in democratic politics perhaps puts the cart before the horse.<sup>259</sup>

In those "rationalized" public spheres where we do find some degree of civic commitment to the ideals of reciprocal reason-giving, that commitment is almost always the product of an earlier,

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<sup>258</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 55.

<sup>259</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*; Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere"; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* Chapter 8.

*pragmatic* “learning process” through which constituents of diverse lifeworlds came to recognize the contextual necessity of cooperation and common political action across traditional communal boundaries.<sup>260</sup> In place of the hypothesized necessity of a universal moral disposition adopted by each citizen *a priori*, Habermas thus suggests that successful democratic legitimation and integration can in fact be founded upon the more modest supposition that citizens will draw the motivation to engage in collective political action from the non-universalized needs and values of their idiosyncratic lifeworld contexts.

This pragmatic model of the origins of democratic communication and cooperation deserves further explication, however, for it is not immediately obvious how localized, purely communal needs can ever incline citizens to embrace a trans-communal procedure of public deliberation and political action. In *A Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas offers at least one justification of this insight through his evolutionary account of the emergence of modern social systems and political structures. Indeed, in that work it is the emergence of pragmatically experienced *problems*, encountered within the task of reproducing communal and social life, that serves as the continuous motor of social development, driving communities to develop new problem-solving procedures, to create new collective institutions, and to seek links with other communities beyond the horizon of lifeworld consensus.<sup>261</sup>

In terms of social evolution, Habermas argues, social cooperation exists in the first instance only within the horizon formed by kinship relations, mythic tribal bonds, and the coordinating force of customary social roles. Community members perform culturally designated roles as a means of “maintaining the material substratum of the lifeworld”; without sharing a totalizing, ethically orienting interpretation of the common world, members of such social groups would not be able to successfully reproduce the conditions of their meaningful communal life.<sup>262</sup> By embracing a singular hermeneutic

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<sup>260</sup> Habermas, “What Is Meant by a ‘Post-Secular’ Society?: A Discussion on Islam in Europe.”

<sup>261</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

frame for understanding society and each individual's place within it, and by reproducing that frame within the habits and views of their children, mythically bonded communities make possible a collective response to the problems of continued survival and the creation of meaning.

This "mythic" form of social organization prefigures complex systems of political action insofar as it coordinates individual actors to work in common to solve shared problems, but it does so entirely without opening a domain of communication in which common goals can be deliberately legitimated.

As Habermas explains,

Concepts of validity such as morality and truth are merged with empirical concepts such as causality and health. To the extent that the mythical understanding of the world actually steers action orientation, action oriented to mutual understanding and action oriented to success cannot yet be separated, and a participant's "no" cannot yet signify the critical rejection of a validity claim. Myth binds the critical potential of communicative action...<sup>263</sup>

Norms of familial hierarchy, religious duties, and the gendered division of labor, for example, cannot readily be called into question within mythic social groups, for there simply exists no "outside" to the totalizing hermeneutic frame from which any individual could generate an alternative perspective. No secondary set of context-transcending communicative practices allows for the possibility of debate or appeal.

The initial cracks emerge in the total world views of traditional societies, therefore, not as a result of internal normative criticism; they can only emerge dialectically as the conventionally arranged processes of lifeworld reproduction encounter novel problems, produce unexpected consequences, or in some other way fail to cope with the evolving conditions of the community's continued existence.

Throughout both his *Communication and the Evolution of Society* and *A Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas returns again and again to this catalyzing role played by emergent problems within

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 159.

lifeworld reproduction as a means of explaining the historical trends of increasing political complexity and of constant innovation in social institutions. In a revision of the orthodox Marxist distinction between “base” and “superstructure,” Habermas even suggests that the long historical process by which conventional relationships of kinship and myth were replaced by administrative institutions suggests that we might view the “domain of emerging problems” within the lifeworld as the true social “base.”

Unlike the classic Marxist model, the “base” of lifeworld problematization does not initially, or even for the most part, appear as a centrally economic phenomenon; the rationalization and differentiation of society cannot be understood purely in terms of an ongoing battle of economic productivity against material scarcity.<sup>264</sup> To the contrary, in Habermas’ model it is the ever-present desire of lifeworld confederates to reproduce their shared cultural norms, relationships, and existential meanings in the face of emergent problems that promotes continuous socio-structural innovation. Insofar as conventional mechanisms of social regulation cannot always ensure the fulfillment of certain vital lifeworld aims, traditional societies are confronted with crises that demand revision of the social structures of lifeworld reproduction. These crises might be political, cultural, or indeed even economic in origin insofar as activities in each of these social domains are oriented towards the attainment of pre-defined lifeworld goals. Regardless of where the crisis arises, however, the essential point is that it is the emergence of problems within the task of lifeworld reproduction that causes societies to first question their traditional hermeneutic and normative frames and to seek out new modes of social action. As social structures of reproduction constantly confront the test of evolving experience, the inadequacies of old, sedimented habits are laid bare, and traditionalist societies are motivated to develop new legal and political mechanisms empowered to oversee and even overrule conventionally dominant ethical norms.

The details of each evolutionary leap in the rationalization of social organization need not detain us

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<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

here, however, for the challenge to Habermasian theory we are examining is quite specific: can the pragmatic recognition of “problems” or “crises” within lifeworld reproduction motivate individuals of disparate cultural backgrounds not just to accept socio-political innovation within the normative consensus of their lifeworld, but further to accept the deliberative processes of trans-communal political institutions as legitimate and authoritative? If, as Habermas admits, traditional lifeworld cultures do not always already make use of the rational processes of critical communication, what will motivate such cultures to turn to communicative tools in times of crisis? Why would they accept that the legitimate resolution of social problems might necessitate that the input of individuals outside of their community be included, or that the resolutions must be justifiable to those outsiders? Indeed, so long as a lifeworld community remains relatively homogeneous, autonomous, and isolated from the influence of other social groups or systems, then it would seem unlikely, to say the least, that even the direst of crises could prompt the group to support an open sphere of deliberative criticism as a form of civic negotiation and adjudication over and above their traditional structures.

Few lifeworlds in the modern era, however, have been able to maintain the homogeneity, autonomy, and isolation that enable communities to cope with emergent problems entirely through conventional means. Not only are the roots of most modern social problems traced back to larger socio-economic forces housed outside of the small-scale action-complexes of lifeworld-unified communities, but, additionally, the collection of individuals affected by such problems almost without fail will spill across lifeworld boundaries of faith, ethnicity, or community. To remedy economic injustices, environmental harms, or entrenched forms of social discrimination, afflicted communities and individuals have to cooperate with others who do not share a uniform ethical self-understanding, but who do nevertheless suffer under similarly problematic conditions.<sup>265</sup> The only tools available for such cooperation will be tools of rational communication: the assertion of facts and the weighing of values,

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<sup>265</sup> For an example of such problems, cf. Habermas, “What Is Meant by a ‘Post-Secular’ Society?: A Discussion on Islam in Europe,” 72.



the evaluation of arguments, and the critique of proposed courses of action.

Indeed, it is precisely the trans-communal structure of modern social problems that, Habermas has argued, is historically responsible for the communicative ideals of contemporary secular democratic institutions of governance. In one of his most compelling elaborations of this socio-political hypothesis, Habermas thus traces the development of the modern relation between the public sphere and the institutions of political administration back to a confluence of economic expansion, administrative over-extension, and cultural splintering dating from the early modern era in Europe. Insofar as the old, ethically consolidated structure of the feudal household could not effectively master the burgeoning forces of international trade and capital investment in the early modern era, a two pronged process of social evolution was initiated that saw the parallel development of two new socio-political institutions. On the one hand, there arose a new class of horizontal interpersonal relationships that knit together individuals of disparate regions, religions, and ethnicities as members of a sort of non-contiguous commonwealth—“civil society”—delineated by the scope of the shared economic and political problems its members jointly faced.<sup>266</sup> On the other hand, new institutions of democratic governance arose directly in response to the active clamor this new civil society produced as it lobbied for its interests in new forums of public communication. “The public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs.”<sup>267</sup>

This agonistic relationships between civil society’s public sphere and the institutions of the democratic state has continued to evolve over the course of the previous three centuries, with the democratic public becoming more inclusive in membership and expansive in scope, though perhaps less efficacious in its representation of the various parties’ interests. In an important sense, however, the

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<sup>266</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 19, 24.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

key results of this historico-pragmatic evolution remain in effect today: the efficacy of democratic institutions of governance is dependent upon the acts of political problematization undertaken in the public sphere, and the legitimation offered by the public is only given on condition that these institutions in fact remain responsive to a core set of mutually recognized problems. Citizens are motivated to participate in democratic discourse in the first instance in order to advertise the ways in which developing social problems impinge upon their lifeworlds, and they accept the administrative authority of secular institutions insofar as such institutions are the necessary tools for confronting trans-communal and inter-communal difficulties effectively. If particular lifeworld communities within modern nation states remain resistant to participating in or recognizing the legitimacy of democratic politics, we need not pin the blame upon some moral failing within that community. Instead, a pragmatic understanding of democratic solidarity encourages us to understand how this resistance might be rooted in an inability to perceive the entanglements of communal interests with trans-communal social forces or in an institutional failure to respond effectively to a community's problems.

Given the fact of sociological pluralism, and given the complex and interconnected nature of modern social problems, lifeworld-embedded individuals have little choice but to communicate their grievances beyond the bounds of their ethically unified community in hopes of finding common cause across ethical and cultural boundaries. It is this brute fact of contemporary social entanglement that serves as the ever-present pragmatic motivation for citizens of disparate backgrounds to accept and contribute to collective institutions of governance and to participate in the communicative forums of the public sphere. So long as we remain unable to resolve economic or social disturbances within the narrow confines of an isolated ethical community, and so long as we remain unable to ensure the continuation of any one cultural mode of life without the cooperation of other communities, we are prompted to seek aid, redress, and facilitation through trans-communal political discourse. It is this recognition of the pragmatic need for democratic institutions, as well as the active process of publicizing

problems within public debate, that constitutes the core of modern democratic citizenship.

#### **§4 Problematization and Education**

Habermas' theory of democratic practice greatly unburdens the ethics of citizenship of the onerous moral expectations that deliberative democrats placed upon the individual citizen, and he thus relieves educational institutions of some of the most controversial elements of their civic mission. Habermas does agree that communication is necessary in the life of a democracy, both as a means for citizens to advertise the emergence of problems before the public and as a means for institutional actors to justify the policies and laws of the state to the citizenry. And yet, despite his commitment to discursive integration, Habermas never insists upon extending the burdensome civic responsibility of reciprocal reason-giving to each and every citizen, as do Gutmann and Thompson. A communicatively unified democracy does not depend upon spreading a singular moral commitment to reciprocity across the body of the public, and it is thus not necessary for the schools to teach such a moral commitment as an obligatory part of the democratic curriculum. In fact, such a moralized attempt at social integration may in the end only serve the purpose of promoting disenchantment, alienation, and further social antagonism.

Nevertheless, the communicative theory of democracy does not entirely abolish the expectations or obligations that the democratic polis must place upon its citizens, and it does not abandon the work of democratic education, for the successful recognition and resolution of emergent problems within the *socius* still requires the discursive participation of individual citizens. In place of the moral disposition of reciprocity, Habermas, however, offers a theory of civic integration and democratic engagement that is directly rooted in the pragmatic personal and communal motivations of lifeworld-embedded individuals. It is the continual encounter with far-reaching social problems—problems that invade and affect one's personal life or one's community—that constantly underlines the need for collective political action,

democratic institutions, and joint solutions to problems that cannot be dealt with individually. The clear recognition of how trans-communal problems impinge upon an individual's private life is the key pragmatic force that prompts the acceptance of publicly accountable, secular political institutions. Furthermore, the active investigation and publicization of those problems by individual citizens in the public sphere constitutes one of the central mechanisms by which the public can direct and control those political institutions. Civic "problematization" within the public sphere enables citizens to demand that political governance remain responsive to the needs of the people—the needs that justify the public acceptance of governance in the first instance.<sup>268</sup>

Habermas' model of communicative democratic practice, therefore, offers a new foundation for the civic mission of the school: the ethos of problematization, rather than a moral commitment to reciprocal deliberation, must be inculcated in the body of the citizenry in order to reproduce the continuing possibility of democratic life. Insofar as the diverse individuals of a pluralist society confront an overlapping set of problems that they cannot resolve individually or within the cloistered corridors of cultural communities, to that extent they will rely upon the active work of a problematizing, discursively democratic public to cooperatively confront the challenges of the present. Communicative democracy seems to require of citizens two interrelated civic practices: first, an integrating recognition of the mutual problems that unite the socius, and second, an active attempt to investigate, advertise, and publicize emergent problems on the other. Although the motivation to engage in these practices, as described in the preceding sections, must ultimately be grounded in an individual's pre-existing lifeworld goals, it is nevertheless true that even this limited ethics of citizenship does not automatically spring forth from the public as an expression of pure civic exuberance. These civic activities are practices that must be cultivated, encouraged, and supported within the democratic polity, and they can easily wither in social contexts where individuals are discouraged from investigating problematic social conditions or

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<sup>268</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* Chapter 8.

are disallowed from voicing the problems of their experience in the public arena. The initial impetus to civic engagement must come from a citizen's encounter with social problems that hinder the accomplishment of their lifeworld goals, but this act of recognition can only be developed into a democratic ethos of problematization through extensive cultivation and encouragement. Reproducing this ethos of problematization is the focus of the democratic educational mission.

A recent essay of Habermas' on the problematic political integration of Muslim minorities in Europe, illustrates more fully how the pragmatic motivations citizens feel to engage in politics might be stymied without continuing educational work.<sup>269</sup> Habermas argues that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the successful formulation of a new and more inclusive European public is hindered at least in part by the continuing non-recognition of mutually entangled problems on both sides of the Christian/Muslim culture divide. On the one hand, some sub-sets of the Islamic cultural milieu within Europe discourage individual members' inquisitive forays into European political issues, maintaining their focus instead on the political issues of the home countries; on the other hand, right-wing European-nativist parties actively push politically motivated European-Muslims back into their closed off cultural enclaves through occasionally violent practices of open discrimination. Responsive democratic politics requires that citizens not "barricade themselves up within the self-enclosed lifeworlds of their religious communities and themselves off from each other," but the mutual mistrust characterizing this cultural divide prevents citizens even from recognizing one another as "members of *one and the same* political community."<sup>270</sup> It prevents them from recognizing their shared political fate.

In such a situation of mutual mistrust, the deliberative call for moral reciprocity seems hopelessly naïve, for extreme partisans on both sides of the cultural divide have little motivation to try to understand and communicate with other groups. It is only the dawning recognition of shared social problems that will ever draw culturally isolationist individuals out of the shells of their communities to

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<sup>269</sup> Habermas, "What Is Meant by a 'Post-Secular' Society?: A Discussion on Islam in Europe."

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 68.

engage in cross-cultural democratic politics, attending to the claims of others out of pragmatic necessity in lieu of moral principle. In situations such as the European scenario, it would appear that the work of political integration must begin by directing citizens to consider more closely the deep historical, economic, and sociological roots of their current frustrations. This is first and foremost an educational mission, because recognition of these shared problems depends upon multiple social “learning processes,” as Habermas refers to them, that bring the influence and force of social problems upon the lives of all communities directly to the attention of a fragmented public. These learning processes might be catalyzed through political activism, journalism, the arts, or even through formal educational arrangements, but to be effective they must encourage citizens to inquire more deeply into the roots of their social dissatisfaction that stretch far beyond their particular lifeworld. The stability and resiliency of the democratic system are dependent upon a broad-based recognition of shared social problems in the citizenry and an actively engaged public that constantly works to reveal new problems that re-knit the socius together, and both of these democratic functions are produced through the work of democratic education.

Habermas’ pragmatic conception of communicative democracy may not require of all citizens an onerous moral commitment to reciprocal reason-giving, but it does nevertheless request of the citizenry on the whole some key activities and dispositions supportive of democratic cooperation.

Problematization—understood both in the passive sense of recognizing shared social problems and the active sense of investigating and advertising emergent problems—is the core virtue of democratic politics. Unlike other ethical conceptions of the duties of citizenship, the concept of problematization grounds civic duties in the already existent lifeworld motivations of identity, culture, and community, and it is thus a political activity that ought to be supportable from the perspective of any variety of lifeworld ethical doctrines. Nevertheless, the ethos of problematization can wither under hostile conditions, and it requires active support, encouragement, and cultivation to reach its full development.

In short, the democratic practice of problematization has not yet dispensed with the need for civic education; to the contrary, it depends upon education—but a reconstructed education that focuses pragmatically upon shared social problems rather than abstract and idealized moral commitments.

## Chapter 4

### Reconstructing the School for Problematization

The central problem confronting contemporary American education that I have examined in the previous three chapters of this dissertation is a problem that arises out of social tensions endemic to modern, pluralist democracies; in short, it is the problem of whether there can be an educational system that serves the general social needs of the polity without undermining the reproduction of ethical identities that occurs in culturally specific communities. Since at least the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American communities have had to accept the brute fact that there can be no return to the culturally isolated parochial schools of early American history, and modern school systems have had to try to find ways to accommodate deep social diversity within the walls of an intercultural institution. The preeminent educational strategies that have been deployed to confront this problem over the past two centuries, however, have by and large failed to accommodate the needs of both community and society, vacillating between an administrative logic of economic individualism, which sacrifices the cultural work of identity formation in favor of economic integration, and a communalist vision of cultural independence, which ignores the shared cross-cultural needs of the socius at large. Such one-sided educational systems either sap the polity of the resources of ethical motivation that flow from community and confession, or they fragment the socius into isolated cliques incapable of responding to common threats and dangers. Presented with these complex social and cultural challenges, contemporary educators, I believe, have yet to find a way to serve the broader social interests of the pluralist polity without confounding the processes of identity formation that occur within ethically



unified communal contexts.

Following a long tradition of democratic theorists, from John Dewey to Jürgen Habermas, I have argued that the goal of reproducing and improving the civic resources of democratic politics is the educational mission that can best mediate between the competing demands of community and society. This preeminence of the democratic mission of the school is justified by the pragmatic fact that even as divergent socio-cultural constituencies vociferously disagree about the particular morals, beliefs, or skills that ought to be inculcated in the next generation, all parties to public debate inescapably rely upon democratic mechanisms of self-governance as the method of articulating social or communal interests and of resolving social tensions. While members of a pluralist society are unlikely to unify behind a singular curriculum for all children, therefore, their common reliance upon the incorporated body of the democratic public to resolve shared problems nevertheless inclines them to accept the reproduction of the democratic public as an obligatory goal of all educational arrangements. Reproducing the political ethos of democratic participation in the rising generation of citizens is thus an educational ideal that balances the needs of society and the needs of community, simultaneously allowing communities of shared belief to defend their processes of ethical identity formation while refusing to abandon the trans-communal structures of cooperation that allow the public to cope with shared problems.

The democratic ideal thus gives us an orienting mission for contemporary education, but there nevertheless remains a vital unresolved question as to what specific mechanisms of educational reform or reconstruction best serve the ends of democratic reproduction. Americans of the past several generations have come to think of education as synonymous with schooling, but given the entanglement of the school with non-democratic forms of organization and power, it is not immediately clear how—or even whether—the presently existing school system can be reconstructed to work towards the revitalization of democratic life. A number of critical theorists like Ivan Illich, Michael Katz, and, in brief commentaries, even Jürgen Habermas have in this vein criticized the modern school as a

centrally administered institution of depoliticization; the school, on this account, undermines autonomous acts of democratic problematization by inculcating in students a purely economic system of personal motivation and a hierarchical conception of social relationships.<sup>271</sup> The hostility of the school towards democratic politics that these critics perceive, furthermore, is not merely an artifact of one particular curricular scheme; it is an antipathy built directly into the bureaucratic and institutional structure of the school. By removing students from the motivational forces of rooted lifeworld cultures, and by replacing dynamic communal relationships with unilateral relations of authority and obedience, the basic strategies of institutional schooling militate against the construction of an actively cooperative democratic public.

These radical criticisms of the school's administrative and pedagogical structure, I believe, present educational reformers with an incisive perspective on the flaws in the present system that inhibit democratic growth and reproduction, and they help to set the agenda for reconstruction. Although some critics, like Illich, argue that only the outright abolition of institutionalized schooling can reverse the depoliticizing effects of education today, I argue in the subsequent that the institution of the school, flawed as its history has shown it to be, can in fact still serve the necessary end of promoting the democratic ethos of problematization. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what other lifeworld agencies or social structures could promote the requisite civic ethos that underwrites democratic self-governance if not the publicly regulated and endorsed school. While it is true that the lifeworld relations of culture and community are the primary agencies for shaping individuals' identities and political motivations, which in turn are essential ingredients in problematizing political discourse, democratic problematization nevertheless also depends upon a non-trivial set of critical communicative capacities and a minimal ability to recognize shared problems. The responsiveness and efficacy of democratic self-governance hinges upon the ability of the individual citizen "to ferret out, identify, and effectively

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<sup>271</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society*; Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*.

thematize latent problems of social integration (which require political solutions)” and upon the willingness of the individual to “introduce [problems] via parliamentary (or judicial) sluices into the political system.”<sup>272</sup> This activity of problematization might well depend in large measure upon non-institutionalized resources of ethical critique and cultural identity, but it does still presume the sort of complex discursive abilities and cross-cultural communication that might be profitably encouraged by dramatically reconstructed institutions of education.

While the tight administrative grip that the bureaucratic school possesses over pedagogical relationships must undoubtedly be loosened, and while the liquidated cultural content of the standardized curriculum must assuredly be restored, the school still possesses potential as an effective—even necessary—institution of democratic revitalization. By encouraging the habits of civic inquiry into shared social problems, by rebuilding the communicative capacity of publicizing new and emergent problems, and by allowing the rising generation of citizens the opportunity to listen to the converging and diverging claims of a diverse public, a radically reconstructed school can promote the vital democratic ethos of problematization.

These difficulties of educational reconstruction are the central challenges that I will confront in this chapter, first (§1) by examining in more detail the ways that the *status quo* educational institution inhibits the development of democratic citizens, secondly (§2) by noting two promising paths of reconstruction that nevertheless fail to overcome the depoliticizing effects of the institution, and finally (§3) by asserting a basic framework of educational problematization that serves the needs of democratic revitalization without falling back into the quagmire of purely administrative solutions. Ultimately, I argue that the skills and dispositions for democratic agency can in fact be promoted through a radical reconstruction of existing institutions, but only if the centralized pedagogy and curricula of bureaucrats and expert administrators are replaced by a practical program of problematization in which diverse

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<sup>272</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 358.

communities collectively inquire into the conditions of their shared social complaints. Democracy does find a partner in the school, but only if the life of the school centers around collective and cooperative acts of problematization rather than the centralized transmission of standard skills and knowledge.

### **§1 Systems Rationality and the Administered School**

The process of institutional education occupies an ambivalent space within the contemporary social matrix, standing at the juncture of lifeworld processes of socialization and bureaucratic mechanisms of administration. Education, understood in a broad sense simply as the social work of ushering children into adulthood, is first and foremost a lifeworld enterprise, socializing children to negotiate complex relations of dependency, trust, and cooperation as well as to construct meanings and purposes for their lives. This type of socialization depends upon thick communal resources of shared meaning, affective relationships of care, and deep contextual sensitivity to the needs of individual children. But as the school has evolved in the liberal-democratic West, it has been designed to function as an administrative institution that manages large numbers of children from diverse backgrounds, and it conducts its educational mission through bureaucratic power structures that are insulated, to a degree, from lifeworld communication and critique. Through a centrally administered pedagogy, the school removes youth from the idiosyncratic contexts of community and culture in order to provide equal access to the skills and knowledge necessary for success in later life, but at what cost? The political goal of promoting an actively problematizing democratic ethos in the citizenry, in particular, presupposes that citizens find their identities grounded in a robust lifeworld context whose health often stands in conflict with the school's bureaucratic organization.

On the surface, then, the administrative structure of the school would seem to be in direct conflict with the goal of reconstructing a problematizing public. We can find at least initial grounds for this suspicion of the school's suitability for democratic reconstruction in the analysis of the bureaucratic

“colonization” of social life elucidated by Habermas in the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* and confirmed by other critical theorists like Michael Katz and Ivan Illich. Although Habermas has never undertaken a sustained analysis of the school in its own right, his colonization thesis has been influential in shaping a critical theory of education due to the sharp analytic tools it offers for understanding the modern conflict between systems rationality and lifeworld solidarity. The more that the lifeworld is relieved of its educational work by a centralizing administrative system, “the more the school palpably takes over the functions of assigning job and life prospects,” the educational system is “close-circuited with the employment system,” and the citizen’s role is “neutralized.”<sup>273</sup> This central distinction between lifeworld and system thus brings into focus the tension that persists between the democratizing goals of modern educational systems and the bureaucratic methods relied upon to achieve those goals, and I believe it is worth our time to sort out the particular obstacles that the systematized administration of the school creates for the goals of democratic education.

Modern school systems are administrative agencies of a democratically legitimated welfare state, bureaucratically structured to strategically execute certain socio-educational functions. If we pause to consider the goals of the educational system as they are commonly understood by its administrators, it is not obvious that there could be any systematically anti-democratic effects of an institution so dedicated to promoting the stability and persistence of the democratic public.<sup>274</sup> Like other institutions of public welfare, the state-sponsored school is usually tasked with a number of projects revolving around the development and guarantee of individual liberties—simultaneously cultivating individuals’ intellectual and social capabilities so as to afford them equal opportunities in life, as well as rooting out illegitimate forms of inequality and discrimination in order to expand the sphere of effective exercise of liberty. These liberal welfare goals, additionally, might be seen to work hand in hand with a larger

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<sup>273</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 368, 371.

<sup>274</sup> Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*.

democratic political project, both by promoting the skills necessary for democratic participation and by securing the harmonious social relations necessary for civic cooperation. Such political goals do not of course exhaust the aims of education; the inculcation of intellectual skills and the dismantling of discriminatory inequalities cannot alone provide the young with stable individual identities, cannot reproduce valuable cultural forms of life, and cannot introduce individuals into the panoply of social relations constitutive of their society. Nevertheless, the welfare mission of the school is a vital response to the historically recalcitrant problems of inequality and structural domination that plague liberal-capitalist states, and it has often served as a motivating mission for educational reformers to recommend increasing administrative centralization and expansion.<sup>275</sup>

Indeed, the problems of further developing individual liberties, securing equal opportunities, and promoting social integration are the problems that have, historically speaking, most urgently prompted the expansion of centralized educational systems.<sup>276</sup> Confronting entrenched problems of social inequality and the autonomy-hobbling effects of a capitalist economic system in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditional lifeworld educational arrangements proved incapable of overcoming the obstacles that prevented successive generations from taking up and effectively exercising the liberties guaranteed them under liberal constitutions. The development of a state-supported educational system—as in the later cases of unemployment assistance, medical care, and assisted income initiatives—met with widespread public support insofar as it promised to harness the money and administrative power of the state to achieve its democratically equalizing goals; the state-supported school would supplement the earlier, frequently ineffective programs of education that had been organized through informal networks of aristocratic tutelage, familial relations, or communal solidarity. The state’s monopoly on force, its superior monetary resources, and its constitutionally mandated commitment to equal treatment under the law made it ideally suited to the egalitarian project of conquering intransigent

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 23–24.

<sup>276</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 361.

discrimination and providing all citizens with the intellectual resources needed to reassert autonomous control over their own lives. Where traditional educational arrangements frequently could not overcome the stratifying and impoverishing effects of a capitalist economic system, the power of the state, channeled through the school, was poised to counteract these negative effects, finally delivering on the emancipatory promises contained within the constitutional scheme of liberal rights.<sup>277</sup>

The primary critique of the school offered by critical theorists, therefore, does not call into question the publicly stated *goals* of modern education systems so much as it questions the procedures, mechanisms, and administrative rationalities deployed to effect those goals.<sup>278</sup> Insofar as the school represents an important aspiration to overcome historical inequalities and promote liberation of individual energies, it stands on a solid foundation of democratically legitimated political goals, but insofar as it formulates its actual pedagogical techniques and administrative methodologies under non-democratic procedures, critical theorists will raise the pointed question of whether the instrument of the school does not stand in direct conflict with its democratic mandate. The expansion of state power within the sphere of education, in this sense, is not an unmixed blessing.

While the state-sponsored school promised to equip individuals and communities to better confront the vagaries of the market economy and the pernicious effects of trans-generational poverty, it simultaneously introduced new mechanisms of external administration and strategic rationality into the midst of a previously lifeworld-directed, communicatively organized activity. The work of the teacher becomes a strategic game of achieving pre-determined educational outcomes dictated by bureaucratic experts, and the communicative process of constructing, critiquing, and justifying educational goals in conversation begins to disappear from school community. By organizing education into “strategic”

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<sup>277</sup> This gloss on Habermas’ interpretation of the welfare state’s intervention into education policy offers a far more positive, Promethean account of the birth of the school than the version presented in the first chapter of this dissertation; nevertheless, it is in Habermas’ critique of administrative rationality, below, that these two accounts importantly align.

<sup>278</sup> See especially, Katz, “From Voluntarism to Bureaucracy in American Education.”

rather than “communicative” relationships, the institutionalization of educational administration undermines some of the central roles that affective and communal relationships necessarily play in personal and political development—even as the ambitions of the school administrators might nevertheless be purely emancipatory or democratic in intent.

Habermas’ lifeworld/system distinction draws our attention to two salient characteristics of the school’s new administrative rationality, in particular, that I will explore in more detail. (§1.1) Firstly, the historical invention of the state-supported, bureaucratic school system effects a general narrowing down of interpersonal relations within and around the school, and a hierarchical authority structure replaces communicative cooperation. In short, educational decision-making is removed from the diverse set of lifeworld interactions aimed at mutual understanding and placed in the hands of a decontextualized bureau of expert administrators. (§1.2) Secondly, in the attempt to develop a neutral and universally acceptable curriculum, stripped of contentious value presuppositions, the new class of educational administrators, intentionally or unintentionally, also opens the door for a reductionist economic logic to structure the developing child’s goals, habits, and modes of interaction. Rather than constructing his personal identity and purpose in dialogue with communal and cultural sources of value, the child is encouraged to adopt the competitive, economic schema of value that rushes in to fill the normative void left in the purportedly neutral curriculum.

### *§1.1 Hierarchical Structures of Control*

In the case of the first characteristic of the school’s burgeoning strategic rationality—the bureaucratic reorganization of educational decision-making—it is easy to see how the impetus for this administrative development might initially stem from a desire to realize liberal-democratic goals, even as the distant effects of that initial aspiration might undercut democratic potentials. Critical historians of urban American school systems have recognized that the bureaucratization of the school community,



and the resulting conversion of lifeworld relationships to bureaucratic service exchanges, was at least in part a response to the pernicious inequalities and inconsistencies inherent in the ad hoc, localist traditions of earlier American history. Focusing on the situation of industrial New England, historian Michael Katz thus reminds us that Common School proponents often publicly justified the centralization of educational administration as a means of overcoming the inequalities between upper and lower classes within the urban environment, ensuring that all children were given equal access to a basic level of literacy education with a certified competent instructor. Middle class reformers were undoubtedly motivated in part by their shock at the “poverty, ignorance, profligacy, and irreligion” of immigrants and laborers, and they accordingly played on prevalent bourgeois fears of social instability to promote state support for paternalistic mechanisms of population control; but these reformers also expressed seemingly genuine concern about “a classification of society as broad and deep as ever divided the plebian and patrician of Ancient Rome.”<sup>279</sup> The construction of a school bureaucracy that would unite the educational efforts of disparate neighborhoods and communities under the authority of an expert class of civil servants held out the promise of overcoming unjustified social inequalities to provide all children with an equal standard of excellence.

Whether they were motivated by a bourgeois fear of the unwashed masses or by an egalitarian commitment to social reform, however, the strategies of bureaucratization and centralization pursued by reformers has served to efface the influence of communicative, lifeworld relationships upon educational activities. Loosely following Katz’s pioneering historical analysis, we might break the bureaucratic reform model into three basic maneuvers, each of which reorganizes certain key lifeworld relationships of education to convert them to systemic functionality. First, the bureaucratization of the school entails centralizing educational decision-making authority, removing local lay control and replacing it with a hierarchical structure of expert office-holders; the role of state curricular boards and

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<sup>279</sup> Henry Barnard, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 314.

the formation of specially commissioned supervisory agencies serve as examples of this trend just as much as the more obvious subordination of teachers to principals and principals to superintendents does. Each layer of bureaucratic administration is given oversight of the layer below, with few mechanisms in place for lower levels of authority to question decisions made at higher levels. Second, bureaucratization entails the fragmentation of the schools' activities into discrete, isolated acts of educational delivery which can be separately monitored and evaluated for success and efficiency; here we ought to think not only of the division of the curriculum into distinct grades and subjects, but also of the effort to organize the teaching of a subject around testable "skill sets" each of which can be evaluated precisely through standardized testing. The norms and standards of to be achieved in these discrete act of educational delivery are, of course, dictated at the highest levels of the centralized bureaucracy. Third, bureaucratization also demands that each agent placed in the chain of administration must be rigorously certified as capable of executing the performances and duties established as procedure. The teacher, in particular, must be certified as an agent capable of executing mandated pedagogical performances and proctoring the evaluations demanded by central authorities; in essence, the teacher then becomes the functional bridge between the educational bureaucracy and its clients, enacting the decisions made at higher levels at the ground level and then reporting results back up the chain.<sup>280</sup>

From a Habermasian perspective, the primary concern stemming from this process of bureaucratization is that the growth of administrative rationality in education implies a corresponding diminution of communicative understanding between students, teachers, and parents.<sup>281</sup> This effacement of communicative interaction in the school is an inevitable product of one of the core axioms of bureaucratic organization: in an administrative hierarchy, substantive decisions about the goals of the institution are decided at the highest levels, and all subordinate officers, in the name of

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<sup>280</sup> Katz, "The Emergence of Bureaucracy in Urban Education: The Boston Case, 1850-1884: Part I," 157.

<sup>281</sup> Murphy, "Forms of Rationality and Public Sector Reform: Habermas, Education and Social Policy."

efficiency, are expected simply to execute the plans crafted by their bureaucratic supervisors.<sup>282</sup> Between parents and teachers, therefore, there can be relatively little negotiation or justification of curricular content or disciplinary protocols, because policies and procedures are announced at the highest levels of administration and are in essence impervious to base-level criticism.<sup>283</sup> This exclusion of parental or communal input has famously served as a flashpoint for the discontent driving recent homeschooling and voucher movements, and the general lack of transparency and communication behind administered curricula often provokes an anti-expert reaction that subsequently rejects all scientific and historical authority in preference of purely traditional sources of value.<sup>284</sup> Through its rigid decision structures and its resistance to communicative justification, bureaucratic decision structures thus contribute to the reactionary fragmentation of the democratic public, igniting citizens' frustration without providing any channels for productive dialogue or collaboration.

Of even greater concern than the collapse of the parent-teacher or community-school communicative relationships, at least for critical theorists of a Habermasian bent, is the disappearance of communicative socialization from within the walls of the school itself, as the teacher-child relationships becomes increasingly modeled on the exchange between a civil servant and a client. Habermas argues that the socio-moral development of the child, as will be described in greater detail below, is facilitated through immersion in communicatively organized contexts of interaction—that is, social settings in which children can grasp the norms and expectations placed upon different actors and can open a discussion about the justification of those norms. Administrative rationalization, however, replaces the communicative contexts of interaction with strategic contexts in which the discursive interrogation of the school's norms or standards is ignored or silenced. Teachers are not afforded the professional discretion to tailor educational content or pedagogical techniques to the needs of their

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<sup>282</sup> Katz cites Carl Friedrich on this point, but we might also reference the classic studies of Max Weber.

<sup>283</sup> Hursh, "Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies," 513–514.

<sup>284</sup> The famous case of Kanawha County in many respects etched the template for these continuing struggles. Cf. Mason, *Reading Appalachia Left to Right: Conservatives and the 1974 Kanawha County Textbook Controversy*.

specific students, and insofar as they are required to implement a curriculum designed wholly without their input outside of the classroom, it is unsurprising that the relation between teacher and student sheds almost all interactive, communicative dimensions.

Most recently, critical attention has focused on the classroom interference effected by No Child Left Behind, but of course NCLB's strategy of deploying tests and evaluations as methods of normalizing teaching practice is not an isolated legislative invention.<sup>285</sup> Recent British critics have likewise complained of the "increasing reduction of classroom experience to the 'measurable,'" and historical scholars have traced these methods back to the birth of social statistics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>286</sup> The tactics have been relatively homogeneous across different educational systems: in order to ensure equity, efficiency, and accountability, the school day is broken into a series of unilateral transfers of knowledge from teacher to student, and these transfers are followed by a series of discrete evaluations in which the student must perform to the standards the teacher has been trained to judge. To receive the certification offered by the institution, a student must simply prove that he or she can perform certain skills to the standards articulated by the central administrative bureaucracy; the teacher, furthermore, is held strictly accountable for preparing a specified proportion of students to adequately perform according to standards. "Education is increasingly described in terms of accountability, focusing on measurable outcomes in terms of instrumentally-construed knowledge and skills. The curriculum, teaching and learning are all taking on the language of bureaucratic relationships."<sup>287</sup> Agreement between the parties of the exchange matters little here, as does comprehension or justifiability of the standards, so long as the services offered by the bureaucracy are delivered efficiently and fairly.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Hursh, "Assessing No Child Left Behind and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies"; McCarthey, "The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Teacher's Writing Instruction."

<sup>286</sup> Walsh, "Narrowed Horizons and the Impoverishment of Educational Discourse: Teaching, Learning and Performing Under the New Educational Bureaucracies," 114; Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism*.

<sup>287</sup> Deakin Crick and Joldersma, "Habermas, Lifelong Learning and Citizenship Education," 84.

<sup>288</sup> Murphy, "Forms of Rationality and Public Sector Reform: Habermas, Education and Social Policy," 86–88.

As the interaction between teacher and student is collapsed into a set of strategic exchanges (knowledge given for performance returned; performance given for certification returned), the danger also arises that the child will be ill-equipped to participate in any sort of substantive democratic dialogue as an adult. Through communicative interactions with teachers, parents, and classmates—asking for explanations, justifications, reconsiderations, etc.—a child is given the chance to utilize the norms of a community of discourse to criticize problems felt in their social experience, as well as to cooperatively construct solutions to shared problems. A teacher ideally can facilitate this process by organizing the class into cooperative projects, by offering opportunities for discursive questioning and explanation, and by understanding and serving the developmental needs of individual children. When “socialization in schools is broken up into a mosaic of legally contestable administrative acts,” however, nuanced communicative interactions are replaced by “a system of achievement and competition.”<sup>289</sup> The democratizing dimensions of cooperative learning lose ground to an individualizing competition; opportunities for children to raise problems are liquidated; demands for justification or explanation are obviated by the eminence of administrative authority; and the attention to differing individual needs, while still possible, is overridden by the driving incentive to bring the majority of children up to normalized standards.

Describing similar trends in social work, another communicative practice subject to systems colonization, Ricardo Blaug notes that “the interventions available to [social workers] are less and less a matter of professional judgment and are now pre-ordained by law and practice codes”; rather than attending to individual needs through conversation, and rather than formulating shared goals through discursive negotiation, the teacher-student relation, like the counselor-patient relation, becomes a matter of strategically executing approved interventions. Blaug argues that “as our communicative

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<sup>289</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 371.

processes become colonized, we lose the ability form our opinions and beliefs through discussion.”<sup>290</sup>

Without the extensive experience in communicative problem posing and critique provided as a matter of course through most lifeworld relationships, individuals are not prepared in any substantive way to engage in complex acts of democratic problematization.

### *§1.2 Competitive Economic Socialization*

The erosion of communicative relationships within and around the school, however, does not simply thin out capacities of critique and justification from the moral development of the child, for in the absence of a robust communicative regulation of educational goals, the ground is also well-prepared for purely systemic or functional imperatives to dictate the habits, values, and relations to be fostered through education. The mounting influence of systemic imperatives—economic concerns in particular—over the intellectual and ethical development of children can thus be understood as an ensuing effect of the first dimension of administrative rationalization within the school. As communicative avenues of educational discussion between parents, teachers, and children are closed down and replaced by bureaucratic relations of educational administration, the ability of a school to support any curriculum of moral development tied to robust ethical traditions embedded in the broader community becomes increasingly hobbled. The administrative bureaucracy generates curricular and pedagogical standards that make little accommodation for the piecemeal construction of variegated forms of ethical character development across communities; it issues standards that can be applied to all schools and districts precisely because of their apparent normative thinness. The pressing concern articulated by Habermas, along with a number of other critical theorists like Paolo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Bowles and Gintis, has been that the ideal of an ethically non-controversial or neutral curriculum serves as a cover for the elevation of purely economic character ideals—productivity, efficiency, competitive motivation—as the

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<sup>290</sup> Blaug, “Distortion of the Face to Face: Communicative Reason and Social Work Practice,” 428–429.

ethical glue that holds the curriculum together.

Historically speaking, this critical concern about the economization of moral development has proven well founded. As described earlier in this dissertation, the early days of the Common School movement saw school crusaders searching for moral justifications of the school that could appeal to as broad a swath of the population as possible. In part this meant that school leaders like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard attempted to strip texts and lessons of the most overtly sectarian controversies surrounding scripture and religious doctrine, but in practice it also meant that the values of the economic system gained a foothold in the school as educational goals that religiously or culturally divergent constituencies could converge upon. On the analysis of historian David Tyack,

The leaders of the movement were canny about framing their arguments and programs to bring possible dissenters into the common school...By playing on the fears of the prosperous about social stability...they tried to demonstrate that public education was respectable and a guarantee of order. They assured the common people that public schools were a portal to economic opportunity and a right of citizenship.<sup>291</sup>

A school system that promised to teach the working class punctuality, frugality, temperance, obedience, and reward motivation secured the support of the businessmen and shop owners whose property taxes were financially indispensable for the school; but the same system could also be sold as a guarantor of social mobility and economic improvement to the masses, gaining the support of the legions of parents who would be asked to send their children to fill the classroom.

The promise of economic mobility and stability has thus served as a powerful enticement to draw a diverse public into institutions of public schooling, but how has this promise cashed out in the actual educational development of individual personalities and skill sets? The most direct impact has perhaps been the coordination of academic and developmental priorities with the needs of the business and

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<sup>291</sup> Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980*, 23–24.

industrial sectors, as educational leaders have solicited the input of businessmen to the continual reform and fine-tuning of the curriculum. This project of coordination had already commenced in the 1840s as Horace Mann surveyed Massachusetts factory owners to understand the skills and habits they desired in their employees,<sup>292</sup> and it certainly intensified through the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the managerial, “social efficiency” approach to education championed by Ellwood Cubberley and the followers of Frederick Taylor.<sup>293</sup> In the first century of centralized, administered school systems, the coordination of business and educational priorities inspired numerous disciplinary efforts to inculcate into the student body the habits of a docile work force. As Bowles and Gintis argue in their classic study, the correspondence between the personal habits rewarded in the school and praised on the factory floors is nearly exact; comparing supervisor ratings of workers with teacher evaluations of students, Bowles and Gintis note that obedience to authority, self-discipline and perseverance, external motivation, and emotional control are the most highly-valued personal attributes in both of these institutions of hierarchical administration and supervision.<sup>294</sup> Nor should this correspondence be surprising, as the managerial methodologies of evaluation and supervision adopted in the schools as means of ensuring efficient curriculum-delivery were themselves frequently first developed on the factory floor.<sup>295</sup>

While this essentially *disciplinary* influence of the economy upon education has continued largely unabated up to the present,<sup>296</sup> more recently critics have noted new channels of influence that have emerged alongside disciplinary priorities over the past twenty to thirty years. In a post-industrial capitalist economy, the perpetual reproduction of an obedient working class no longer serves the needs

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<sup>292</sup> Mann, “Report for 1847.”

<sup>293</sup> Reese, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind,”* 144.

<sup>294</sup> Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* Ch. 5.

<sup>295</sup> Au, “Teaching Under the New Taylorism: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of the 21st Century Curriculum,” 26.

<sup>296</sup> Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America.*



of economic growth fully, and both governmental policy and administrative strategy have evolved to supplement the work ethic of the disciplinary curriculum with reinvigorated ideals of personal entrepreneurship and skill-flexibility. In policy documents from the US, Canada, the UK, and the EU alike, discussions of the new globalized and rapidly changing economy are consistently followed by calls for schools to teach children how to retrain, re-skill, and re-equip themselves over the course of their lifetimes. Mobility and flexibility replace reliability and perseverance as the watchwords of a “learning society” in which the rigors of the fluctuating market demand that every individual be prepared to re-educate and re-package himself to match the needs of fickle employers.<sup>297</sup>

While it is yet uncertain precisely what ramifications these new economic imperatives within administrative rationality are having upon the school, it seems clear at least that the trend is not to restore the work of articulating personal goals or educational ideals to the jurisdiction of any sort of communicative relationship. To the contrary, the imperative of workforce flexibility has perhaps forged an even closer alignment between the needs of the labor market and the vocational training programs of large high schools. Even at the level of elementary school, Jonathan Kozol reports, children are encouraged to think about how they might market their skills to prospective employers, how they might construct a resume and list of references, and how they might direct their education and extra-curricular activities to boost their resume.<sup>298</sup> Such a strategic approach to education might indeed be necessary for attaining individual economic success, or, from a systemic perspective, it might indeed be useful for supporting consistent national economic growth. But the elevation of these economic imperatives to become the central goal of the educational system neutralizes the possibility inherent in communicative educational relations of publicizing problems with the economic system first felt in personal experience,

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<sup>297</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 160–164; Hyslop-Margison and Sears, *Neo-Liberalism, Globalization and Human Capital Learning: Reclaiming Education for Democratic Citizenship* Ch. 1; Mitchell, “Neoliberal Governmentality in the European Union: Education, Training, and Technologies of Citizenship,” 389–407; Popkewitz, “Governing the Child and Pedagogicalization of the Parent: A Historical Excursus into the Present,” 48–50.

<sup>298</sup> Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* Ch. 4.

of articulating heterodox educational values, and of exploring alternative, non-economic life and career choices. If education organized to attain economic success through administrative management of the individual's habits and aspirations, then it achieves this success only at the expense of the political, cooperative, and critical capacities that emerge out of communicative contexts of ethical conversation and political problematization.

## **§2 Tentative Paths towards Communicative Reform**

The modern school system is not a monolithic institution, marching ahead in lockstep towards some singular educational vision of economic competitiveness or social homogeneity. For every curriculum streamlined for efficiency and achievement, and for every classroom converted into relations of performance and evaluation, there certainly exist teachers, counselors, and principals struggling to develop democratic and communicative capacities within their students or to integrate education more firmly into the life of the surrounding community. Despite these commendable challenges to the bureaucratic colonization of education, however, it is difficult to deny the long-term persistence of certain uniform trends of centralization and economization that tend to undermine the ethical and political development of the young. The systems colonization enabled by the administered school is problematic for a critical democratic theory of education because it undermines the capacity of the public to observe, discuss, and collectively respond to shared problems. By entrusting the education of future citizens and members of the public to instrumentally organized content delivery systems, modern schools may be able to prepare individuals for economic success, but they do not build the interpersonal relationships and the forms of collective concern that make democratic self-governance possible.

The democratic critique of the administered school, therefore, would seem to focus reform energies on two primary problem domains of the existing system. In the first instance, instrumental relationships in education, which model only strategically coordinated behavior for children, need to be restructured

as communicative relations in which children gain experience in the interpretations, implementation, and critique of norms and values in discourse; and in the second instance, the motivational scheme of competition and individualized rewards needs to be replaced with inquiry into the shared social problems that might motivate cooperatively social participation in democratic life. By repairing educational relations to model communicative interactions, and by reconstructing curriculum to draw students' attention to the problematic conditions of their social existence, the school can potentially become an institution of democratic revitalization.

Already within these two basic actions of democratic reform, however, we can hear the dangerous siren call to pure administration and expert management—the temptation to guarantee desired educational outcomes through the most strategically efficient mechanisms. Many democratic educational programs, both theoretical and applied, have begun with the focused intention of reforming non-communicative classroom relationships or reinvigorating the curriculum with lessons in problematization, but in the quest to guarantee the cultivation of democratic skills and an engaged public some of these programs have relied once again upon administrative arrangements that actively undermine democratic potentials. Indeed, the struggle to articulate democratizing programs of reform that do not fall back upon anti-democratic mechanisms of administration to effect their goals constitutes one of the central challenges of democratic educational theory.

By working through the promise and the problems of earlier programs of democratic reform, however, I believe we can potentially find a way forward for reconstructing the school without undue reliance on instrumental mechanisms of administration. In the following, I will briefly examine the schemes of democratic reform—one focused on the Habermasian ideal of communicative development and the other upon the pragmatic goal of a public unified around common problems—noting the ways in which democratic reform can be drawn too close to the anti-democratic paths of administration. Any successful democratic reconstruction of the school, I contend, if it is to avoid the dangers of

administrative colonization must learn to restrain its ambitions and surrender a significant degree of its administrative authority to the unpredictable educational agencies of community and public.

### *§2.1 Securing Communicative Development*

If the instrumental relationships of the administered school undermine the potential for democratic participation in the future citizen, then the most immediately necessary path for democratic reform of the school would seem to require a reintroduction of communicative relations to the classroom. In place of strategic exchanges in which teachers deliver pre-approved knowledge and students return evaluable performances certifying the receipt of knowledge, the classroom must be reorganized to train students to engage in the give and take of critique and justification that enables the public to come to a shared understanding of the common social world. But how can the fundamentally asymmetrical power relationship of teacher and student in the school promote this kind of open dialogue without collapsing back into non-communicative management?

To hue a path of communicative reform in the classroom, a number of educational theorists in the 1990s turned to the study of developmental psychology as a path to better understand the stages of moral growth that lead children from the self-absorbed world of strategic egoism to the intersubjective realm of communicative discourse.<sup>299</sup> Inspired by Habermas' adaptation of Kohlbergian stage theory, these educational writers began to explore the idea that the properly democratic school would usher students through the stages of communicative development towards an ideal of rational discursive participation, drawing out their latent capacities for mutual understanding through an arranged set of interactively pedagogical encounters. Even if the classroom itself could never precisely duplicate the "ideal speech situation" of egalitarian, coercion-free rational discourse, the hope arose that the school

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<sup>299</sup> Young, "Habermas and Education"; Terry, "Habermas and Education: Knowledge, Communication, Discourse"; Blake, "Ideal Speech Conditions, Modern Discourse and Education"; Englund, "Rethinking Democracy and Education: Towards an Education of Deliberative Citizens."

could nevertheless bring students to the threshold of democratic dialogue by using the teacher's classroom authority to introduce students, step-by-step, to the dispositions and norms that make democratic dialogue possible.

The Habermasian view of development adopted by these communicative reformers begins with promising insights into the structure of moral learning through childhood, even if the implementation of these insights into the organization of the school leads inexorably to certain administrative contradictions. Moral development, on Habermas' account, occurs primarily through the psychic mechanism of perspective taking and the associational act of reflexive engagement with others in a social network. It is only through a process of active, intersubjective engagement with a surrounding social world that the child can learn to understand the motivations and expectations of her peers, enabling her to move from an initial attitude of egological wish-fulfillment towards forms of association based upon mutual understanding and communication. As a child interacts with her parents, her peers, and strangers, she slowly learns what actions and reactions to expect from others, she learns to carve out her own identity within the network of communal norms, and she eventually learns to acknowledge as valid some of the norms that regulate that sphere while discursively criticizing others. The successful accomplishment of this developmental transition into a communicatively forged moral identity, however, depends entirely upon the child's early immersion within normatively structured social networks—that is, her exposure to lifeworld relationships grounded in understanding and cooperation rather than purely strategic competition.<sup>300</sup>

The school environment, as critical democratic theory has revealed, is almost entirely lacking in the intersubjectively legitimated norms that are supposed to lead the child towards a communicatively developed identity. To take but one example, the formal relationship that holds between teachers and students within the administratively supervised classroom does certainly operate upon the basis of

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<sup>300</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 142–145.

regulatory norms, including norms of good student conduct and norms of proper instructional procedures, but because these norms are imposed by an administrative superstructure, they are not communicatively redeemed and they do not *internally* motivate students or teachers to abide by them. Without having good reasons dialogically offered in support of governing norms, teachers will be openly dismissive of the administrative standards they are required to implement by virtue of their office, and students will likewise be openly dismissive of the behavioral and scholarly norms that organize their classroom activities. The norms associated with the role “student” and the norms associated with the role “teacher” are seemingly obeyed by the respective parties merely for strategic reasons, as students are motivated to attain satisfactory evaluations and teachers are motivated to maintain their jobs.

This strategic arrangement of the classroom, from the developmental perspective, is only an acceptable arrangement so long as children are exposed to other forms of intersubjectively recognized norms outside of the classroom. Insofar as the administered classroom becomes one of the primary sites of moral socialization in the young, however, which is an undeniable consequence of the lengthening school year and school day, to that extent strategic behavior can overtake and foreclose the possibility of communicative development. Without constant exposure to social interactions in which norms are both intersubjectively recognized and discursively redeemed through the give and take of good reasons, children may not learn to adopt the communicative disposition of seeking mutual understanding and cooperation rather than simple wish-fulfillment—dispositions which are essential to the discursive democratic work of identifying and resolving shared social problems.

In light of the potential harm done to the democratic capacities of the public by administered education, Habermasian theorists like Robert Young have argued that strategic relations in the school must give way to increasingly communicative contexts in which students and teachers can search, through discourse, for common values and purposes and in which the governing norms of their relationship can be questioned and justified through discourse. Although power asymmetries remain,

the communicatively organized school provides room for teachers and students to interact at a discursive level in which they can cooperate as relative equals in formulating shared projects and values.

Young writes,

...the schooling system must itself sometimes anticipate 'symmetrical relations of unforced reciprocal recognition' *within* the overall structure of authority and trust that characterizes the educational relationship, if students are to be allowed to practice and so develop the necessary personal qualities for mature, democratic citizenship.<sup>301</sup>

In particular, the student-teacher relationship must be expanded from the merely strategic role-fulfillment of the administered classroom to include opportunities for the "unforced reciprocal recognition of students-as-fellow-inquirers," as well as opportunities for "coercion-free debate *among* students."<sup>302</sup> By allowing teachers and students to engage in conversation concerning the rules and standards that the teacher enforces, by allowing students to discursively inquire into one another's actions and beliefs, and by allowing these conversations to form a core part of the classroom experience, the classroom becomes a space in which social norms can collectively articulated and embraced, moving the child beyond the egological wish-fulfillment encouraged by the administered classroom. Rather than reinforcing a merely strategic orientation to social norms and social goals, the school can by this route promote a communicative orientation in young students that directs them towards the goal of reaching a common understanding amongst their consociates.

Young's reform proposal, characteristic of the project of communicative educational reform, thus begins relatively uncontroversially by grounding the reintroduction of communicative practices into the school in a broader democratic project of cultivating actively engaged citizens, and his abstract recommendations for the reorganization of the classroom into discursive relationships could conceivably be endorsed by a variety of educational stakeholders. Indeed, one might even imagine that this model

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<sup>301</sup> Young, "Habermas and Education," 539.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 541.

of communicative reform might mesh well with some of the proposals for communal reform explored earlier in this inquiry. Communicative reforms, like communalist efforts, serve to push back the front lines of administrative colonization by returning a degree of discursive autonomy to the classroom, cultivating ethical and political dispositions through face-to-face models of ethically grounded interaction rather than by redeploying administrative power. In an important sense, unified cultural or ethical communities serve as ideal units for initially cultivating discursive capacities, offering normatively streamlined contexts that introduce children to a limited stock of intersubjective norms and providing contexts for discussion and justification of norms. Peeling back layers of administrative control and returning communicative relationships to the classroom might be more readily achieved by reintroducing robust cultural or ethical commitments to the classroom.

If we dig deeper into the theory of communicative development, however, it quickly becomes apparent that communicative reformers are not wholly immune to the lure of administrative control, and it is precisely in order to reject the return of traditional lifeworld cultures to the work of moral development that they redeploy administrative power to effect communicative goals. Emboldened by the philosophical-scientific discourse of developmental psychology, communicative reformers easily slide from their basic critical position, which seeks to push back against the strategic organization of the school, into a more ambitious program of scientifically administered communicative development, which would specify in detail a single curriculum for communicative development and would reject alternative paths towards democratic communication promoted through culturally specific pathways. The catalyst for this dangerous slide back into administrative power lies in the psychological theory of Lawrence Kohlberg adopted by Habermas, which perceives traditional lifeworld cultures as possessing at best a secondary role in promoting moral development and at worst an actively distorting role.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer, *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and a Response to Critics*; Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.



On Habermas' Kohlbergian view, proper moral development depends upon children pulling away from "conventional" systems of moral commitment and eventually grounding their moral beliefs in a "post-conventional" set of rational principles that they can autonomously justify. Moralized lifeworlds like those of religious sects, mythic cultures, and other communities unified behind ethical visions of the good life, assist in moving children away from the egocentrism of early life by introducing them to a sense of identity that ties them to the fate of others in their community. By being integrated into cooperative performances of communal life, in which the attainment of shared goals depends upon obedience to mutually recognized social norms, children who are raised in close-knit lifeworlds learn to internalize group norms and adopt an attitude of obedience to the purely conventional arrangement of their community.<sup>304</sup> But complete moral development requires young adults to transcend merely conventional obedience and learn to generate a "post-conventional" justification for social norms that can be rationally redeemed in a community of discourse. Some elements of conventional morality might survive this process of transcendence, but others might prove unjustifiable in the clear light of a communication community that scrutinizes all norms through discursive reason giving. Moral development, therefore, would best be supported by raising children within "rationalized" lifeworlds that avoid inculcating in them an early obedience to unjustifiable conventional norms—norms that would only later have to be rejected and transcended by each and every child.

Educational theorists convinced by the Kohlbergian account—which is admittedly more complex than space here allows me to explain—have concluded that conventional cultural moralities have no place in the classroom and indeed that such conventional normative systems might be more efficiently replaced by streamlined, secular moral systems that better prepare children for induction into the realm of the post-conventional. In a confident statement of educational prometheanism, Paul Terry thus argues, "there seems little point in making an arbitrary connection to spirit" in the school, because

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<sup>304</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 145.

...our educational institutions could quite reasonably dispense with actual religious [i.e., cultural] observances...Having broken the moral-spiritual mould, we can now concentrate on the strategies by which education can enhance the moral development of students.<sup>305</sup>

Even Habermas himself is at times swept up into this heroic account of a psychologized education, writing in an early work from 1971,

Today the traditional patterns of socialization, which till now were ensconced as natural in the cultural tradition, are set free by the psychologizing of children's education and the planning of school curricula according to cultural policy...<sup>306</sup>

An education separated from the cultural or spiritual roots of moral belief, it is hoped, can more effectively and efficiently induct students into the rational attitude of communicative respect required of post-conventional society, and central educational planning according to the dictates of developmental science can by this route be deployed in the service of democratic reconstruction.

The fatal dangers of this reliance on psychological administration, however, are multiple. Firstly, the administrative deployment of the school for communicative socialization overconfidently assumes the accuracy of the psychological account of moral development propounded by Kohlberg and Habermas; the post-conventional stage of moral development is implied to be the objective telos of human moral development, despite the fact that this singular vision of moral maturity has been astutely criticized from both feminist and multicultural perspectives as artificially narrow.<sup>307</sup> Secondly, regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of the Kohlbergian theory, the methods of administrative inculcation adopted by communicative reformers stand in direct conflict with the goal of democratic development itself; drawing individuals into democratic dialogue depends upon harnessing and expanding practical

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<sup>305</sup> Terry, "Habermas and Education: Knowledge, Communication, Discourse," 278.

<sup>306</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Praxis*, 26.

<sup>307</sup> Simpson, "Moral Development Research: A Case Study of Scientific Bias"; Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and Morality."

lifeworld motivations<sup>308</sup>—idiosyncratic cultural motivations that are wholly ignored by an administrative system that has “broken the moral-spiritual mould” in favor of scientifically approved schemas of normative development.<sup>309</sup>

It is the first critical danger that has attracted the greatest controversy, and on this count the primary danger of relying upon a singular vision of moral socialization that is proclaimed to be the objectively true pattern of human development is that alternative paths to moral maturity—indeed, alternative versions of moral maturity—are unnecessarily excluded from the school by an unauthorized extension of administrative pedagogical power. The vision of post-conventional moral maturity favored by Kohlberg and aimed at by communicative educational reformers, has been criticized by feminist theorists like Carol Gilligan for emphasizing the role of equal and symmetrical principles of individual rights in informing the behaviors of morally mature individuals while ignoring the possible role played by asymmetrical claims of care.

In Kohlberg’s fifth and sixth stages of moral development, for example, the moral actor moves from pure obedience to the conventional social order towards a conception of reciprocal recognition between moral equals. Although post-conventional respect for others initially takes the form of a self-interested social contract, the sixth and final stage of moral development finds the moral actor abiding by certain universal rules of equal treatment not because of the reciprocal guarantees of equal treatment that he receives in return, but because he has obtained rational insight into the indissoluble dignity of human individuals as a function of their ability to treat one another with equal respect regardless of self-interest.

As Gilligan has famously argued, however, Kohlberg’s account of the path to moral maturity and of the final stages of moral insight does not accurately track the moral development of a large portion of the population. Women in particular, Gilligan observes in her psychological studies, frequently seem to

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<sup>308</sup> Cf. Chapter 3 above.

<sup>309</sup> Terry, “Habermas and Education: Knowledge, Communication, Discourse,” 278.

follow a different developmental path that leads to an alternative final stage of moral maturity. While Kohlberg's stages represent increasing levels of detachment from relationships of dependency as the moral subject becomes increasingly individuated, and while his final stage of moral maturity celebrates the rational independence of moral actors who mutually afford one another respect as autonomous equals, the alternative perspective discovered by Gilligan through interviews with women celebrates the interdependence of moral actors who respond to the needs of one another through asymmetrical acts of care.

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in the women's interviews is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world. For the men Kohlberg studied, the moral imperative appeared rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the right to life and self-fulfillment.<sup>310</sup>

Many women, Gilligan explains, will recount their moral decision making as a matter of responding to the concrete needs of another, eschewing ideals of rights and individual responsibility to the moral law in favor of a notion of responsibility and care, but the developmental framework propounded by Kohlberg can only interpret this care perspective as yet one more immature dead-end on the road towards moral maturity.

A psychologically administered school that arranges students' moral development according to a Kohlbergian paradigm I believe runs the risk of filtering alternative perspectives, like the ethics of care, out of the moral constitution of the population and alienating the public from the democratic mission of the school. If the moral architecture of the school places ushers students towards positions of moral independence, in which equal respect of rights is demanded as the ultimate form of ethical relationship, then the developmental path that leads children to value interdependency and mutual responsibility for one another's well being—or towards some other ideal of moral maturity still compatible with

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<sup>310</sup> Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and Morality," 511.

democratic life—will consequently be neglected. A proponent of Kohlberg’s theory might of course respond to this criticism on empirical grounds by resisting Gilligan’s interpretation of the psychological evidence and reasserting the primacy of Kohlberg’s stages; “care” might be, on this interpretation, merely a stage on the way towards true moral maturity, which prizes independent rights over interdependent concern.<sup>311</sup> Or again, a Kohlbergian might argue, as Habermas himself has, that the moral obligation of care ethics—an obligation to respond to the needs of others through relations of interdependency—is properly a supererogatory moral claim that advances beyond the scope of objective moral maturity towards the contested realm of moral virtuosity; the perspective of independent moral standing highlighted by Kohlberg represents the true foundation of moral behavior, with care ethics arising merely as an ethical offshoot chosen by some as version of the “good life.”<sup>312</sup>

From the vantage point of democratic education, however, the question of which depiction of moral maturity is true or foundational is fortunately one that can be left unanswered, for regardless of the objective psychological truth of Kohlberg’s or Gilligan’s respective theories of moral development, the democratic educator will evaluate schemes of moral education based upon their fitness for reproducing the civic resources of democratic self-governance. The important question for the democratic educator, therefore, is whether the educational cultivation of rights-based moral maturity is so necessary to the work of democratic reproduction that it justifies even the potential sacrifice of alternative ethical perspectives like care ethics. The answer to this question most certainly must be a resounding “no”: the mission of democratic educational reform, we should recall, is to produce citizens capable of recognizing shared problems in their social experience and cooperating communicatively to suggest joint solutions to those problems, not to produce ethical subjects replete with all moral dispositions deemed a component of developmental maturity by moral psychology. The ambitious program of communicative reform advocated by some Habermasian scholars, however, would have the school extend beyond the

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<sup>311</sup> Rest, “Morality and Cognitive Development.”

<sup>312</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 181.

pragmatic aim of enabling robust democratic problematization by organizing the classroom to promote the specific type of moral relationships of independence and discursive detachment central to one model of moral development.

To be sure, the Kohlbergian moral maturity might indeed promote civility, rationality, and respect within democratic discourse, and one need not strain to perceive the potential benefits to democratic life that have attracted attract Habermasians like Young and Terry to propose an administrative deployment of moral psychology within education. But the emergence of educational dissent to the model of communicative independence, in the form of Gilligan's critical work, draws our attention back to the central fact that the unifying mission of democratic education is constituted out of political needs and not moral ideals. The dissent of feminist and multiculturalist critics to the implementation of an administered program for securing communicative moral development, regardless of its truth within the realm of empirical psychology, must be given primacy over the administrative desire for a more perfect form of moral socialization. Moral dissent will only be overridden by a system of democratic education if the dissent undermines the democratic educational purpose of equipping the public to recognize and respond to the shared problems of their social experience. While moral theory might lead us to imagine a more perfect cultivation of moral attitudes and dispositions in the young, the pragmatically political mission of democratic education will prize moral diversity so long as it continues to allow and promote political activity and responsiveness.

The present achievement-oriented, strategic arrangement of the classroom actively discourages the sort of cooperative discourse necessary for democratic self-governance, and the school must certainly be reformed to incorporate more opportunities for developing democratic capacities of communication. But the program of reform grounded in moral psychology unnecessarily calls for much more than this by extending administrative powers to inculcate morally ideal dispositions over the dissent of communities possessing alternative visions of moral maturity. Rather than securing communicative development

through an administrative deployment of moral psychology, educational reformers therefore must search for alternative paths that encourage discourse, critique, and inquiry into shared social problems without stifling potentially valuable sources of normative insight that stem from morally diverse communities.

### *§2.2 Securing Recognition of Public Problems*

If the writings of contemporary Habermasian educational reformers display a sometimes heavy-handed reliance on the theoretical results of moral psychology and the mechanisms of administrative power to encourage democratic revitalization, then perhaps a somewhat lighter touch can be found in the pragmatic approach to democratic educational reform that emerged in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>313</sup> Rather than seeking to administratively secure a single proper path of moral development, the group of educational critics at Columbia Teacher's College known as the "social reconstructionists" attempted to develop a program of thoroughgoing reform that would leverage students' pre-existing pragmatic motivations to engage in political discourse in order to shape them into actively problematizing democratic citizens. By encouraging free-ranging inquiry around the pressing and persistent political problems of the day, the curriculum designed by the reconstructionists aimed to consolidate the diverse constituencies of the democratic public into a single political body by teaching young citizens to recognize how the interests of their community, their culture, and their individual lives all depended upon active democratic problematization in the public sphere. This program of educational reform did not stipulate any controversial schedule of moral virtue or divisive rubric of character development, and it accordingly avoided at least one dimension of the administrative temptation that more recent theorists have fallen prey to. The reconstructionists' attempt to utilize the pragmatically motivating problems of social experience for the purpose of democratic education therefore offers a promising

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<sup>313</sup> Stanley, *Curriculum for Utopia: Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy in the Postmodern Era*.

foundation for an alternative strategy to the psychological theories of more recent reformers.

Inspired by the progressive developmental theory of George Herbert Mead as well as the democratic theory of their Columbia colleague John Dewey, the social reconstructionists of the 1920s and 30s crystallized around the notion that the type of communicative critique required for making a democratic nation responsive to the problems experience by its citizens was not effectively generated under current social circumstances. Not only were the plural communities of the democratic public divided against themselves by economic competition and social misunderstanding, but further, the school system itself discouraged active inquiry into social life, preferring instead to prepare most students to become passive and obedient members of the working class. The reconstructionists held out hope, however, that the schools could become an agent of rapid democratization by bringing children from diverse backgrounds together to inquire, through dialogue, into the historical, economic, sociological, cultural, and scientific conditions of contemporary life. Children who had been trained to engage in active, problematizing criticism of their social circumstances would learn to look beyond the narrow bounds of private or sectarian interest and perceive the challenges that united the populace into a public.

Following this rubric for reform, Columbia professor Harold Rugg developed a popular set of social studies texts that became an influential teaching tool in school districts across the nation throughout the 1930s.<sup>314</sup> Rather than taking a purely historical or narrative approach to explaining American society, Rugg organized lessons into problem-oriented units that asked students to research the manifold political, social, and economic vectors that contributed to the problems of contemporary life and then engage in discursive critique of these problems. In one of his textbooks, *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture*, for example, Rugg organizes an entire unit around the exigent question, “Why should there be unemployment and starvation in the richest country in the world?” and he provides

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<sup>314</sup> Evans, “The Rugg Prototype for Democratic Education.”



students with a variety of historical, economic, and political perspectives to critically engage with this pressing problem of the Great Depression.<sup>315</sup> Students were not only asked to investigate the sociological raw data, however; Rugg's texts also directed the class to participate in an "Open Forum" where classmates might hash out their differing interpretations of a difficult conflict through dialogue, bringing varying normative perspectives to bear upon pressing social problems. Firsthand descriptions of industrial labor conditions were combined with historical accounts of the finance system and factual data describing economic cycles of boom and bust, expanding each student's understanding of the particular socio-economic problem facing the country at that historical moment. Following the phase of investigation and inquiry, the student was then further expected to bring a degree of normative scrutiny to bear, highlighting the features of the situation that appear unjust or incoherent, and finally offering suggestions for reconstruction of social life to correct the problems.

Through such means, the reconstructionist program sought to provoke precisely the sort of critical communicative exchange valorized by Mead as the height of moral development and idealized by Dewey as the epitome of democratic practice, but it accomplished these aims by drawing on the motivating forces of lifeworld problems rather than imposing psychological ideals from without.<sup>316</sup> Beginning with a shared problem that mutually affects all members of the conversation—depression-era concerns over unemployment and hunger—an open dialogue advances through stages of cooperative inquiry, discussion, critique, and eventually, suggestions for reform or reconstruction. Each moment of the reconstructionist curriculum would use problem situations to guide children through the political work normally achieved by the democratic public of adult life: children first map out the various roles played by different actors in a certain social context; they must come to understand the norms and goals that motivate each actor's actions; and finally, they engage in a discursive exchange of reasons concerning misalignments or misinterpretations that cause tensions in social practice. Following Mead,

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<sup>315</sup> Rugg, *An Introduction to the Problems of American Culture*.

<sup>316</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*; Dewey, "The Public and Its Problems."

Rugg assumed that a significant degree of a child's communicative development would occur as an organic outgrowth of lifeworld interactions between parents, siblings, and friends, and the role of the school would merely be to turn those initial capacities of discursive interaction towards a substantive engagement with diverse members of the socius concerning public problems. The school would not manage communicative development *per se*; it would provide a forum for inquiry in which the democratic public might begin to coalesce.

As their program began to grow in popularity, however, and as some reconstructionists increasingly looked to the young Soviet Union for pedagogical inspiration, Rugg and the reconstructionists made a crucial departure from their early pragmatic agenda. In short, they elevated the institutionalized school from its supplementary role as a forum for democratic consolidation to become instead the primary agency of communicative socialization, impugning the role of traditional communities in the construction of democratic citizens. The provocative title that George Counts, one of Rugg's more radical fellow travelers, gave to his 1932 reconstructionist manifesto concisely sums up the more ambitious aspirations that the movement held for the school system: *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*<sup>317</sup> While in previous eras children could be prepared for their pre-ordained adult roles through traditional agencies of socialization and education, the reconstructionists believed that the social changes wrought by industrial and technological revolutions demanded more of the school. In a society ravaged by the force of unfettered capital expansion and rapid technological change, the school system needed to broaden young people's horizons outside of the confines of their parents' older communal milieus.<sup>318</sup> Indeed, under conditions of modern social complexity, traditional educational institutions of family and isolated community could often serve as positive *hindrances* to social development insofar as a narrow concern for community can blind an individual from seeing broader problem structures in society. The school, it was hoped, would be an effective instrument to forge a new "great community"

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<sup>317</sup> Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*.

<sup>318</sup> Stanley, *Curriculum for Utopia: Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy in the Postmodern Era*, 12–13.

of common social effort, pulling children away from sectarianism and towards democratic cooperation.<sup>319</sup>

This burgeoning mistrust of traditional communities within the reconstructionist movement found ample support in the work of John Dewey, whose theory of democracy as social inquiry was a key inspiration for the likes of Rugg and Counts. In his landmark *Democracy and Education*, Dewey had written unfavorably, and convincingly, of the impact of the “antisocial spirit” upon democratic stability in the modern age. “The isolation and exclusiveness of a gang or clique” makes its disharmony with democratic life apparent, Dewey argues,

But this same spirit is found wherever one group has interests ‘of its own’ which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got instead of reorganization and progress through wider relationships...The essential point is that isolation makes for rigidity and formal institutionalizing of life, for static and selfish ideals within the group.<sup>320</sup>

To effectively redress problems of unemployment, homelessness, and hunger, for example, all groups suffering the impact of the financial industry’s failures needed to come together to recognize their shared interests in reforming that sector of the economy and lobby for such changes through democratic channels of power. The close-knit affective ties of community, faith, and family, however, often lead individuals to eschew wide social cooperation in favor of purely local (i.e., shortsighted and ineffectual) solutions. The school, Dewey believed, could remediate this fragmentary effect of traditional communal socialization and “see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born.”<sup>321</sup> By intermingling children from different communities and instructing them under a common curriculum, the democratizing school would

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<sup>319</sup> Dewey, “The Public and Its Problems.”

<sup>320</sup> Dewey, “Democracy and Education,” 92–93.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.

accustom all students to “a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated.”<sup>322</sup>

Following these Deweyan principles, Rugg’s textbooks were designed to draw students’ attention towards metropolitan problems of the factory and finance system, or towards the influence of corporate money on legislation and policy, activating social inquiry around the wide scale shared problems that progressive pedagogues believed could unify an active and inquiring public. Especially during the lean years of the Great Depression, these problem-oriented texts accurately reflected the anxieties and concerns of a broad cross section of American society, and Rugg’s texts enjoyed strong support in school districts across the nation. The fateful misstep of the reconstructionist program, however, lay in its radical underestimation of the continuing importance of purely local or sectarian ties of community in motivating democratic discourse and communication. So long as the social problems identified by the reconstructionists for special curricular treatment matched the anxieties of the manifold communities sending their children to be taught in public schools, then the program met with noteworthy success. The academics at the curricular helm, however, struggled to recognize that support for their curriculum depended in no small measure on the coincidence of different communities’ and families’ idiosyncratic interests, and even as times began to change, the reconstructionist texts continued to teach the key “problems of American culture” as interpreted from the culturally secular perspective of the academic social scientist.<sup>323</sup> Predictably, the shelf life of the reconstructionist program would in the end be dictated by the length of the economic crisis that foregrounded trans-communal problems in the consciousness of America’s diverse cultures and subcultures. Without this coincidence of communal interests in public problems highlighted in the curriculum, the reconstructionist program would have little democratic support to withstand the inevitable attacks launched by business interests and party politicians keen to revert to the earlier educational status quo.

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>323</sup> Stanley, *Curriculum for Utopia: Social Reconstructionism and Critical Pedagogy in the Postmodern Era*, 23–24.

In the end, it was precisely this administrative management of the problem-oriented curriculum and the lack of concessions to communal concerns that would bring down the reconstructionist movement. Social conservatives had always been suspicious of the influence of the Columbia faculty over the teaching profession, and by the time war broke out in Europe, the American Legion began a focused attack on the content of Rugg's texts in particular; in 1940 the Legion's million subscriber-strong magazine included an article attacking the "collectivist" and "un-American" biases of Rugg's textbooks. Organized business interests were soon to follow the Legion's lead, with the National Association of Manufacturers launching a study, widely publicized in the *New York Times*, that ferreted out the "subversive" and anti-business tone of popular social studies texts of the day. School districts in New York and New Jersey area began banning Rugg's books in response, and in 1941, one district in Ohio even ordered the books burned in the school furnace. By 1943, the American Legion boasted of having challenged and ousted the textbooks from 1500 schools, and by the end of the Second World War, the books had essentially disappeared from the system.<sup>324</sup>

In retrospect, scholarship on the controversy has revealed that the textbook fight, despite the carefully crafted veneer of populist outrage, was in its origins essentially a media tempest sponsored by the Hearst press, pro-business groups like the NAM and the Advertising Federation of America, and even elements of the native fascist party.<sup>325</sup> Nevertheless, this staged attack succeeded in reducing Rugg's program to infamy precisely because, in the run-up to World War II, it was able to play on local school board members' fears of a proto-communist or proto-fascist seizure of their children's minds. The reconstructionist social studies curriculum *was* in fact a centrally administered form of expert knowledge as its critics pointed out, and it did indeed teach children to question the structure of the American system. When the problems highlighted by the expert pedagogues aligned closely with the problems felt in local districts, however, the bureaucratic and administrative character of the curriculum

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<sup>324</sup> Evans, "The Rugg Prototype for Democratic Education," 31.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

did not raise many concerns or suspicions outside of the far right. As the gripping problems of the '30s faded, though, and as the passions of local communities turned away from economic problems, the reconstructionist program failed to find new forms of trans-communal problems that would shore up its support amongst local authorities and parents. What had once appeared to local district boards to be an astute response to the problems facing their constituents could now be pilloried as just another form of expert bureaucratic control and manipulation.

With the benefit of hindsight, some recent critical pedagogues have lamented the collapse of reconstructionism because the movement represented, in their eyes, one of the last mainstream curricular trends to openly invite a democratic critique of the capitalist system and to unify a trans-communal public behind an agenda of economic justice.<sup>326</sup> In key respects, however, such eulogies seem to have overlooked what was perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the fate of reconstructionism. Insofar as the movement made its goal the teaching of particular politicized content, and insofar as pedagogical authorities used their position to dictate the problems that children ought to focus their critical energies upon without regard for local and communal input, to that extent the reconstructionist movement cut itself off from the parents and communities that are a vital source of educational and political support. A more careful post-mortem, I believe, reveals that it was precisely the attempt to bypass local perspectives all together and to centrally administer the problem-oriented curriculum that doomed the reconstructionist program from the start.<sup>327</sup> If a pedagogical or curricular program does not tap into the lifeworld roots of communal values and practices of socialization, giving some mechanism for communities to shape the organizing problems of their children's education, then it lacks the only form of legitimating support that can help it withstand the colonizing influences of the economy and bureaucracy.

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<sup>326</sup> Evans, "The Rugg Prototype for Democratic Education"; Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*.

<sup>327</sup> A conclusion shared by Englund, "Rethinking Democracy and Education: Towards an Education of Deliberative Citizens."

Despite this naïveté in regards to the import of communal identification, however, the broader democratizing goals of reconstruction might still call out for resuscitation. Insofar as the pedagogical theory of reconstruction can be separated from its proponents' mistrust of community and their valorization of expert knowledge, it represented a novel attempt to cultivate in the rising generation of citizens the communicative skills of inquiry and problematization. These are skills and dispositions that need not be tied to any one sectarian community or ideology, but they are instead capacities that are critical for the survival of each community that must cope with the complex problems and tensions of contemporary society. The challenge left by the reconstructionists for future democratic educators, therefore, is to decipher how to encourage the development of these essential democratic skills that form the foundation of democratic cooperation while garnering the support, rather than the suspicion, of the multiple communal constituencies that make up the public. How can the school encourage democratic skills of problematization from within communal life rather than by imposing problematizing curricula from without?

### **§3 Schools for Problematization**

The failure of reconstructionism, together with the failure of more recent communicative reforms, illustrates by way of negative example how an education for discursive democratic citizenship must begin by harnessing the internal problematizing energy of lifeworld communities. Democratic publics are unified around mutually shared problems that stretch across the *socius*, and individual citizens accordingly must be educated and equipped to engage in public discursive criticism of these complex problems. Nevertheless, democratic educators must also recognize that the impetus to cooperative public communication and criticism will, for each individual, stem from different lifeworld sources of meaning and value. Because social problems appear exigent to most individuals insofar as they are experienced as problems from the vantage point of their community, educators ought to be careful not

to quickly dismiss sectarian value systems; instead, they must learn to channel these sectarian energies into an active forum of democratic conversation. Contemporary theorists have only recently begun to sketch out the outlines of this community-harnessing form of democratic education, but a few salient points can be developed here to hew a path forward for organizational and curricular reform.

(1) Firstly and most importantly, democratic educators have good reason to concede to communalists a degree of autonomy in establishing culturally or ethically specific schools. Within the current of contemporary educational policy debates, various parties have of course offered powerful reasons to be wary of certain forms of communalist education: many insist that voucher programs, for example, superficially support communal solidarity while reinforcing recalcitrant class differences through an unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities; and likewise, others have warned that an isolated education in religious fundamentalism might disguise and protect pernicious forms of abuse and discrimination internal to a community. Important as such reservations are, however, they fail to present compelling reasons to stand against communal schooling *per se*; they publicize particular dangers that certain communalist arrangements might induce, and accordingly these arguments are subject to adjudication within the public sphere. The basic principle that must guide that adjudication, however, is a principle of communicative capacitation: does a particular educational arrangement provide for the development of the communicative capacities that will enable a child to participate in democratic problematization?

Democratic idealists, accordingly, must soften the longstanding mistrust, bordering on hostility, that has often characterized their attitude towards sectarian schools that gather together children of a common ethnic, religious, or other cultural background to the exclusion of others, and they must attempt to flesh out the communicative criterion that can organize state support of communal educational arrangements. Communal schools can serve a valuable function insofar as they provide children with lifeworld contexts of mutual aid and cooperation; more to the point, culturally or ethically



specific educational arrangements fight back against the strategic organization of classroom relationships, providing teachers and students with a discursively open context of norms and values that provide more robust meaning to their interactions. Additionally, culturally specific educational arrangements also respond to the motivational deficit in political discourse; insofar as they instill in children collectively supported identities replete with motivating ethical ideals and normative principles of critique, they provide them with clear standards with which they can begin to problematize their social world and engage with its problems.

Although many educational theorists working in a Habermasian mold have resisted the extension of a degree of autonomy to culturally or ethically particular communities, taking their cue from Habermas' forays into moral psychology, Habermas himself has more recently voiced careful support of the idea of particular cultural rights that "empower cultural groups in maintaining and providing the resources from which their members draw in forming and stabilizing their identities."<sup>328</sup> Formation of a strong, communicatively engaged identity is only possible as children "[grow] into an intersubjectively shared universe of meanings and practices," and thus the democratic obligation to equally protect the capacity for all citizens to participate in self-governance demands that all individuals have access to "those patterns of communication, social relations, traditions and relations of recognition that are required, or rather desired, for the *development, reproduction and renewal* of their personal identity."<sup>329</sup> For adult members of cultural communities, these special rights to access identity-affirming resources might take the shape of dispensations that, for example, allow Sikh soldiers to wear traditional headgear in lieu of regulation uniforms, or again, they might underwrite a legal guarantee that employees cannot be punished for observing holy days not recognized by their employer. Wearing culturally affirming articles of clothing and participating in religious observances are practices that assist the individual and the group in restoring and reproducing their unique ethical orientation into the future, and the reproduction

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<sup>328</sup> Habermas, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," 18.

<sup>329</sup> Emphasis added. Ibid., 17–18.

of these ethical identities is vital for the life of both the citizen and the democratic public.

For the realm of educational theory, however, Habermas' specific mention of a right to access *developmental* resources of cultural identity is the crucial notion, even if it presents a number of interpretive challenges. After all, the idea that a child has a right to be raised according to culturally specific forms of development implies that a child has an interest in becoming a member of a specific community before she has a conscious desire or will to do so; she has an interest in preserving a particular culture and community even before she identifies as a member of that group. Upon what grounds could such a right be justified and actualized, if not upon the express wishes of the individual? If the child has a primordial interest in living inside of and perpetuating a particular cultural identity prior to her articulating that interest then who defines and defends the child's developmental interests? The view of some 'strong' communalists, explored earlier in this dissertation, would mandate transferring this power entirely to the parents or to the child's culture of birth because; but this view only compels acceptance if we interpret the need for cultural rights as a tool for the survival and reproduction of traditional cultures rather than as a motivational and ethical resource for democratic discourse.<sup>330</sup>

However, Habermas—as well as other communicative theorists sensitive to multicultural issues, like Seyla Benhabib—does not ground the idea of developmental cultural rights upon such an unadulterated faith in the ethical value of culture *per se*, and this distinction fundamentally alters the license given to communal schooling arrangements. Instead of advocating for education as a tool of cultural preservation, the right to culturally specific education, on Habermas' account, is founded upon, and constrained by, an even more primordial *individual* right that guarantees the ability for each and all to participate in democratic discourse within the public sphere. Not just any cultural identity will satisfy the child's developmental needs, therefore, for children have an interest in being raised within strong ethical communities *only so long as that* form of communal development supports and strengthens the

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 21.

individual's future ability to engage in the public exchange of reasons concerning affairs of collective concern.

'Strong' communalists or multiculturalists might of course reject this discursive foundation to cultural rights as an uninvited external intrusion into the internal affairs of a cultural tradition, but communicative theorists have a compelling pragmatic retort. Namely, the very possibility of cultural survival and reproduction in the modern era is dependent upon the ability and willingness of individual members of a community to discursively unify their membership and to lobby for cultural recognition in the public sphere.<sup>331</sup> Given that a hermetically enclosed and self-sufficient cultural lifeworld is all but impossible in multicultural capitalist societies, shot through as they are with fragmenting forces of cultural hybridity and the economic colonization of culture, ethical or cultural groups need members who can lobby for the groups rights to other communities within society and who can discursively justify group norms to members tempted to abandon communal traditions.

(2) The core principle that guides the democratic reconstruction of the school is a principle of communicative capacitation: schools must provide children with those communicative capacities that enable them each to participate at will in the democratic discourse that publicizes and resolves matters of collective concern. We have seen that this overarching goal leads us first of all to a greater acceptance and encouragement of communally specific forms of education, but aside from this organizational or administrative shift, the goal of building a communicative public also implies a curricular shift. In short, classrooms working in the service of reconstructing the democratic public ought to organize their lessons increasingly around motivating problems felt in collective social experience rather than the dictates of economy or administration. The problem-centered curriculum takes advantage of individually motivating experiences to incline students to participate in discursive inquiries into the conditions of contemporary life.

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 22; Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 150–156; Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

In this manner, education for communicative participation follows closely the tracks of the reconstructionist pedagogues of the 1930s, who sought to cultivate an active public through their problematizing curricula. Instruction in scientific, social scientific, and humanistic forms of inquiry in the communicative school might be organized around contemporary problem sets that draw on the practical motivations of students' social experience to enlist them in collective projects of inquiry, critique, and reconstruction. Young citizens, by being offered the chance to investigate the deep roots of pressing social problems, learn to measure the course of their social experience against discursively recognized norms and values; they learn to publicize the tensions, disappointments, and injustices they witness to the broader public; and they learn to give reasons and respond to reasons that justify particular interventions or reforms. These specific educational outcomes can be best achieved through precisely the same sort of practically engaged and communicatively interactive lessons that Rugg's texts introduced into classrooms around the nation.

Unlike the reconstructionist curriculum, however, the organizing problems of the lifeworld-centered communicative curriculum would be defined from *within* the evaluative framework of an ethically unified community or cultural tradition. The communicative theory of democracy recognizes that the most effective form of civic problematization is rooted in and motivated out of values and identities cultivated within culturally specific community groupings. Strong ties to sectarian schemes of value or communal identities do not inhibit an individual agent's capacity to undertake the democratic work of publicly criticizing and reconstructing social experience; to the contrary, when these communally grounded values are channeled in the right way, they magnify the individual's motivation to engage in democratic problematization. Accordingly, rather than organizing a problematizing education around a homogenized set of problems and critical conversations chosen through centralized curricular administration, children might be taught the skills and dispositions of democratic engagement by reflecting upon and working through the problems defined as exigent within their ethical or cultural

community.

The idea of an internally problematizing ethical community, furthermore, need not be limited to traditional educational separatists like Catholics, the Amish, or fundamentalist Christians; the core concept of an ethical community would also apply to recent efforts to launch schools centered around non-cultural communities of value. School communities might unify around progressive environmental values, around social justice activism, or around effaced ethnic identities. It is not the antiquity or sanctity of a community's beliefs that, from the democratic perspective, qualifies the community to serve as organizing educational context; rather, it is merely the fact that the belief structure provides the community's individual members a set of shared normative tools that enable them to publicize and collectively resolve tensions that arise in the course of their social experience.<sup>332</sup> This condition can be met equally well by ethnically and religiously mixed groups that share a broad ethical vision of environmental restoration or economic transformation as it can by congregations of Roman Catholics, which after all do contain wide individual disagreement on contested political issues.

In the case of a non-traditional community of environmental or social justice activists, the impetus to study the modern economic flow of resource, products, and capital across borders might stem from concern over social inequality and/or the environmental wastefulness of a consumer economy; but the same topic area of economic cycles might find its way into a religious school by way of different motivating concerns over the impact of employment patterns on family structure and crime. Different cultural motivations problematize overlapping areas of social experience, but they approach these areas with different shared values and assumptions organizing students' inquiry. These differences in communal motivation matter little, however, so long as students are given the opportunity to investigate the social conditions surrounding problematic areas of their experience, so long as they are allowed to apply their community's critical standards to these emergent problems, and so long as they

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<sup>332</sup> Habermas, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," 22.

are given adequate opportunities to engage in a wide-ranging critical evaluation of the problem area and its potential resolutions with a broader public. The claims of democratic development upon the individual child have been satisfied when these conditions have been filled, and the work of defining the particular problems with which the student engages, and why, might appropriately be left at the discretion of a background ethical culture.

(3) Not all communally or culturally organized educational problematizations will pass muster with the communicative theory of democratic legitimation. An educational program can of course fail to measure up to democratic standards when parents or communities attempt to abridge a child's "equal right to develop their moral and intellectual faculties as full human beings and future citizens as well," in the words of Seyla Benhabib.<sup>333</sup> But a program can also conflict with democratic standards simply by sealing a child off from all reasonable opportunities for contact with alternative points of view; the health of the problematizing democratic public depends upon the basic familiarity of individuals with the experiences of others within their society and their capacity to recognize mutually affecting problems. This was a particular concern of the reconstructionists of the '30s, who were worried that allowing communal groups to organize education solely around the particular interests that animated group life would lead inevitably to the prevalence of an "antisocial spirit" upon which democratic self-governance would founder. Here we must be very careful to sort out which elements of the reconstructionists' complaint merit attention and which perhaps reflect an unwarranted prejudice against non-cosmopolitan communities.

A communal education that gives children a normative and evaluative perspective from which to view social problems, and which encourages them to deploy that perspective in public inquiry and dialogue, still provides for the basic capacities of democratic discourse; young citizens are given the ethical motivations to problematize their social experience, and they are provided with the cognitive

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<sup>333</sup> Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, 122.

capacity to present their views and listen to the views of others in public discourse. A communal education which presented children with one authoritative perspective on social life, however, without challenging children to deploy that interpretation in dialogue and to hear the views of others—much like the elementary education desired by the *Mozert* parents of Hawkins County—would indeed foster the isolationist fever of a group constitutionally incapable of perceiving shared problems. As Benhabib has observed, the danger of allowing complete educational segregation is that it “may simply become a recipe for shielding the balkanization of distinct communities and worldviews from one another.”<sup>334</sup> Despite the existence of shared problems, plural cultural communities lack the public spaces or the dialogic experience to present their grievances and come to recognize shared problems. The metaphor of “balkanization” is particularly apt here, for Benhabib suggests that it in fact was the absence of a civic space of public problematization—a result of authoritarianism and sectarian apartheid—that made peaceful democratic self-governance all but impossible in the post-Cold War Balkans.

The criterion that communal education equip young citizens for communicative problematization, however, rallies against this problem by requiring educational authorities to open up discursive problematization around themes of communal concern. By first of all opening up the “universe of discourse” within the ethically or culturally organized classroom, schools give students a chance first of all to test the interpretations of their cultural group against the evidence that they can assemble from broad inquiry into the roots of social problems.<sup>335</sup> This requirement opens up avenues for children to follow up their curiosity, to ask for justification of teachers’ and texts’ interpretive assertions, and to construct alternative modes of analysis from available evidence. Even more importantly, however, the requirement that students be prepared for communicative problematization also further entails that children cannot be instructed for the entirety of their adolescence within the sealed borders of their cultural group without outside contact.

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>335</sup> The term is borrowed from Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*.

Although the school community itself might be developed around commonalities of culture or belief, and although the curriculum might be designed to express the pressing concerns of one cultural group in particular, a problematizing education requires that as student's advance towards civic maturity, they must be afforded opportunities to enter into dialogue with normative schemas and worldviews other than that of their parents or church. Cross-cultural discourse, after all, is the type of civic activity that educational institutions in a communicative democracy are obligated to prepare their charges for, and it is reasonable to assume that education for democratic participation will require experience in complex acts of discursive dialogue in which competing ideals and interpretations meet. The communicative criterion does not require in advance that children translate their claims into a neutral language of public reasonability, as Gutmann's vision of democratic education entails, for such translation might not be possible without drying up the wells of ethical motivation that push them into public dialogue or excluding idiosyncratic value commitments from public discourse.<sup>336</sup> Nor does this communicative criterion require that children be educated in a common school setting in which cross-cultural dialogue is an every-day negotiation, as both the reconstructionists and at least one recent Habermasian theorist have asserted—for important differences of language, daily scheduling, norms of adult-child relations, clothing, recreation, etc. might be homogenized in such common school settings.<sup>337</sup>

The communicative criterion, nevertheless, does require that children be prepared to present their culturally informed problematizations within the pluralist public sphere and to listen to similar claims made by others. This means that there is a minimal civic requirement that students be exposed to the views of others throughout their education and that they be afforded reasonable opportunities to engage in collective acts of inquiry and problematization with members of other ethical or cultural groups. By giving audience to the problematizing claims of other groups, by receiving an audience in return, and by discussing potential shared problems, young citizens learn the diversity of perspectives

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<sup>336</sup> Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

<sup>337</sup> Englund, "The Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust: Schools as Sites for Deliberation."



that constitute their shared social world and prepare the ground for recognizing areas of common concern into the future.

Alongside the principle of communal organization, and alongside the principle of curricular problematization, therefore, , there is an additional requirement that they participate in *cross-cultural* acts of problematization over the course of their educational career. Although communities are not required to train children to translate their own values into the language of other groups, they must possess the familiarity with the experiences of other cultural or ethical groups outside of their milieu that will enable them to hear the claims of others and recognize potential areas of common concern. Together, these three principles provide a basic framework for organizing a democratic education around the core concept of problematization, educating children in the communicative capacities and dispositions required for them to recognize persistent social problems and discursively evaluate the causes and solutions of them.

#### **§4 Conclusion**

If the democratic educational mission stems from the need to equip children to one day participate in the democratic process itself, as democratic idealists from Dewey to Gutmann have asserted, then it is perhaps incumbent upon democratic institutions to promote the development of more ethically and culturally directed forms of education. As I have argued above, the internalization of a robust schema of collectively recognized values is an essential prerequisite for the work of democratic problematization, both as a toolbox of critical principles and as a motivational impetus for noticing exigent problems. If cultural or communal education facilitates the development of problematizing consciousness more readily than the current “achievement” centered curriculum, then the state arguably has something more than a mere *license* to allow communal education to forge ahead. The state potentially has a further *duty* to make this sort of education around thick ethical values and identities available to all

children in pluralist societies rather than being an ad hoc conciliatory strategy offered solely to maligned minority groups or isolated extremists. To foster the effective identity formation that makes democratic politics possible, the school system more generally ought to unite the curriculum around stronger ethical values than the current curriculum allows.

The Habermasian interpretation of democratic citizenship as a practice of communicative problematization investigated in the third chapter of this dissertation supports a complex, but ultimately feasible reworking of educational administration and the democratic curriculum. In the preceding pages I have attempted to apply this conception of communicative problematization to the realm of education by clarifying the set of principles and goals that might accordingly direct the reorganization of the school around communities of value rather than around centrally administered standards of achievement and around the practice of communicative problematization rather than mere economic preparation. The concrete implementation of these principles must of course be worked out through local negotiations and dialogue, and in this sense the problematizing model of education remains incomplete; different publics will come to different compromises and visions of what forms of cross-cultural dialogue or problematization are essential for the continuity of democratic self-governance. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of protecting and supporting such complex practices of collective problem solving that the principles of a communicatively problematizing education are ultimately justified. Perhaps rather than searching for an educational theory that resolves all lingering tensions and controversies, we ought to be satisfied with one that improves our ability to collectively negotiate our differences and reconstruct our institutions through democratic dialogue.

## Chapter 5

### The Limits of Education for Problematization

In his classic study of American educational idealism, Henry Perkinson describes the school as Americans' "imperfect panacea"—a relatively malleable, if limited, institution that social reformers of all stripes have relied upon as an all purpose tool, bending and hammering the institution into shape to serve the tasks of the day.<sup>338</sup> As Perkinson notes, in different eras the school has been pressed into service to alleviate poverty, eliminate class divisions, halt crime, improve social mores, or to bring about racial harmony, and in many of these cases, the reform of the school has indeed produced demonstrable results: racial integration of schools *has* helped younger generations overcome some prejudices stubbornly clung to by their elders; egalitarian funding of districts *does* improve socio-economic mobility in limited ways.<sup>339</sup> But when reformers allow educational reconstruction to occupy a singular, paramount importance in their plans, their aspirations for dramatic social change can quickly overtax the school and extend its mission far beyond its inherently limited capacity to shape the socius. The school alone cannot solve racial disharmony or equalize economic opportunities for all, for these problems are embedded in our beliefs as well as our institutions, and in our identities as well as our laws. An overreliance on the school to support an ambitious prospectus of social reform can lead us to ignore the multiple political fronts upon which these battles must be fought.

The school's limited record as a social panacea is an important caution for democratic educators, for

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<sup>338</sup> Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education*.

<sup>339</sup> Tropp and Killen, "The Role of Intergroup Contact in Predicting Children's Interethnic Attitudes: Evidence from Meta-Analytic and Field Studies"; Paris, *Framing Equal Opportunity: Law and the Politics of School Finance Reform*.

the enthusiasm for democratic revitalization can become ensnared by the allure of educational cure-alls as easily as any other passion for social reform. The school, I believe, *can* promote the basic set of skills and dispositions required to engage in communicative problematization, as I argued in the preceding chapter, especially if discursive critique can be more solidly integrated into lifeworld practices of ethical socialization. Teaching children to criticize the problems of their social experience by discursively deploying the standards and values native to their ethical lifeworld is an essential step in the revitalization of democratic politics; but ought the school do more than this? Does the health of the democratic public further require that individuals critically dig beneath the lifeworld foundations of their beliefs, rationally validating or rejecting the norms of their upbringing in order to attain critical autonomy? Such practices of reflexive criticism could arguably make a democratic citizen more flexible, sensitive, and responsive to the emergent problems of his experience, but it is not clear that this process of autonomy-formation can be legitimately or successfully advanced through the school. To fully understand the role of the school in democratic revitalization, I believe we have to decipher what civic resources the school *cannot* nurture, as well as which resources it *must* guarantee.

In concluding this dissertation on the prospects of education for democracy, I believe it is essential, therefore, to investigate the inherent *limits* of democratic education. Habermas' articulation of the civic ideal of communicative problematization—of citizens drawing on sectarian values to highlight problems emergent in their social experience and presenting them in a public exchange of reasons—has offered an orienting goal for the reconstruction of the democratic school that still leaves the bulk of educational decisions open to the work of diverse communities; but as I will argue in this chapter, there is a powerful temptation to leverage the power of the school beyond this limited goal. This temptation arises from the fact that the pragmatic disposition of problematization fostered by the communicatively reformed school still comes up short when it comes to the task of confronting certain recalcitrant social problems that embed themselves deeply within our cultural and ethical identities. Although from a purely

theoretical vantage point it might appear that communicative education offers democratic citizens a powerful lens to magnify and project *all* of the problems of their social experience before the public, the situated perspectives of individuals engaged in certain concrete struggles today—including elements of feminist and environmental politics—reveal the existence of problems that are not so readily susceptible to simple communicative problematization and presentation. Citizens subject to these occluded problems therefore rightfully contest that a communicatively democratic education under serves them by not giving developing citizens the critical tools to recognize and cope with the difficulties unique to these domains of social experience. Such occluded problems, because they demonstrate clearly the limited scope of democratic reconstruction that can be achieved by communicative education, would seem to justify a more radical conception of democratic citizenship and civic education. In order to help us cope with some of the most exigent and entrenched problems the public faces today, some radical reformers call on the school, however imperfect its track record, to help cure those social ills that have proven resistant to most every other form of political contestation.<sup>340</sup>

This line of radical democratic educational reform, I will argue in what follows, astutely points out the limited political efficacy of educating children for communicative problematization: ethical socialization into a discursive community does not always allow for children to reflexively question the constitution of their own identities, and this limitation has real consequences for political struggles like those of contemporary feminists and environmentalists. However, the limitations of communicative education, I believe, cannot easily be transcended by a more thoroughgoing form of critical education without producing destructive contradictions in the democratic legitimacy of the school. To reconstruct the school to encourage deep reflexive criticism of identity construction is to fall prey, once again, to the illusion of the imperfect panacea. Not only can the school not provide the autonomous critical resources needed to support the radical psychic and social reconstruction implied in such schemes, but

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<sup>340</sup> I believe we can see symptoms of this temptation to overextend the school in the work of contemporary critical pedagogues like Henry Giroux and Peter McClaren.

additionally, the attempt to forcibly stretch pedagogy and curriculum to support that reconstruction pushes the school past the bounds of its democratic warrant.

Education for communicative problematization, we must accept, is indeed a limited practice of democratic revitalization, and it does not contain the seeds for an entirely transformative reconstruction of the public sphere. Insofar as some social problems resist communicative problematization because of their deep ties with our ethical identities, communicative democracy therefore does call out for supplementary practices of political engagement that will enable occluded problems to step into the sphere of public debate. But this need for hypercritical, identity-questioning practices of problematization cannot be satisfied within the walls of the school; it is a democratic need that must be met outside of the safety of the institution by individuals courageously risking their secure identity standing in order to provoke reflexive critique through alternative modes of problematization.

### **§1 The Scope of Communicative Politics**

At the heart of Habermas' conception of communicative politics is the ideal of a critically engaged, discursive public sphere—an ongoing and open conversation between citizens in which the public draws attention to new and emergent social problems, interrogates the manner in which governmental and economic institutions support or interfere with the independent construction of communal life, and elaborates collective social goals to be effected through law and policy. The discursive public sphere has arisen in historically contingent ways in different states, based upon the pragmatic motivations of diverse communities embedded in the *socius*, but Habermas argues that as traditionally independent groups begin to engage in common discourse as a method for solving mutual difficulties, all parties to this discourse must recognize certain norms of inclusion, equality, and freedom from coercion that guarantee the right of every individual to engage in public discourse.<sup>341</sup> The principles of education for

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<sup>341</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 305–306.

problematization outlined in the last chapter, accordingly, are designed to fulfill this right by giving young citizens the civic skills and dispositions necessary for engaging in democratic practice: endowing children with the ethical background to evaluate their experience, the discursive skill to publicize the problems they encounter, and the pluralist disposition to hear out the claims of others.

Much of the philosophical debate surrounding Habermas' conception of communicative politics has centered upon the justifiability of his normative criteria, such as the requirement that all parties to discourse must reciprocally recognize the right for all other parties to engage in discourse: are these norms transcendental imperatives, which are therefore universally valid? Or are they pragmatically derived from the structure of everyday communication, and therefore relatively contingent? It is not my intent here to put to bed these difficult theoretical controversies, and indeed, over the past two chapters I have relied heavily upon a pragmatic justification of these normative demands for inclusion and equal preparation for civic life that bypasses the transcendental debate. Namely, this pragmatic argument asserts that because discursive politics is an essential tool for confronting the problems of economic colonization, administrative centralization, and cultural conflict that characterize modern social life, individuals and groups of all stripes must come to recognize that in order to control the broad forces that dictate the circumstances of social life, they need to engage in a critical dialogue with all other parties affected.<sup>342</sup> There is no power but communicative, democratic power that can empower individuals and groups to gain control over the disintegrating forces of economy and administration that interfere with their self-generated life goals and plans, and it is the *efficacy* of active democratic politics, above all else, that underwrites public support for an educational program for communicative capacitation.

This pragmatic argument for supporting communicative education, however, can be quickly

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<sup>342</sup> This pragmatic tack of justification is also deployed occasionally by Habermas alongside his quasi-transcendental arguments. See, for example, his account of the successive "learning processes" undergone by different European cultural groups up to and including Turkish-born Germans in Habermas, "What Is Meant by a 'Post-Secular' Society?: A Discussion on Islam in Europe."

troubled when we begin to search for exigent problems affecting the socius that are resistant to communicative problematization. Since the 1990s a number of feminist critics have contested Habermasian theory on precisely this point, arguing that rational discourse in the public sphere has delivered painfully limited results for feminist struggles for equal recognition and equal opportunities.<sup>343</sup> Indeed, on some accounts, it is the educational process of communicative socialization itself that makes the political problems surrounding feminine identity—or non-traditional gender identities—resistant to effective political problematization.<sup>344</sup> Ironically, Habermas frequently appeals to the very same example of the progress of feminists’ struggles against masculine domination and legally enforced patriarchy as an apparent ‘success story’ that demonstrates how the power of open communication in the public sphere can give amplification to problems felt in the experience of individual participants. The case of feminist politics thus provides in many ways an ideal test case for understanding the limits to communicative politics’ revelatory power—and by extension, the restricted utility of educating individuals for communicative problematization.

Habermas’ optimistic—even Pollyannaish—interpretation of feminist political history stems from a basic theoretical position: that communicative politics allows individuals to stand before the public as an equal participant in discourse and to present the problems of their social experience, and further that discursive participation allows individuals to appeal to the norms of equality and inclusion built into the fabric of communication itself. From this perspective, it is precisely women’s engagement in the public sphere and their deployment of communicative norms that has carried emancipatory feminist politics so far over the past century. Although in their initial bourgeois, patriarchal, and culturally homogeneous forms, the public spheres of the emerging liberal states of Europe explicitly excluded the supposed ‘irrational’ elements of society (women, the unpropertied, non-whites, non-Christians), the egalitarian

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<sup>343</sup> Meehan, *Gendering the Subject of Discourse*; Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender.”

<sup>344</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*; Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*.



procedures of reciprocal reason-giving that developed within these new discursive publics implicitly gestured at an unrealized, potentially revolutionary normative potential that feminist politics was able to harness.<sup>345</sup> Habermas writes,

In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the universalist discourses of the bourgeois public sphere could no longer immunize themselves against a critique from within. The labor movement and feminism, for example, were able to join these discourses in order to shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as “the other” of a bourgeois public sphere.<sup>346</sup>

The legislative and legal project of dismantling the manifold prohibitions that kept women out of politics, education, and the workplace was a long and arduous one, but it was made possible, Habermas asserts, because the communicative norms of equality and mutual respect that emerged out of the informal public sphere had already in many polities been inscribed as constitutional rights. Women had merely to lay bare the realities of their unequal treatment and oppression and measure them up against publicly legitimated norms of individual dignity. Through a campaign of publicly criticizing the inequalities and discriminations written into the fabric of the law itself, therefore, liberal feminists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries held the state up to its own normative standards and demanded an alteration of the law to resolve its internal contradictions. This is a straightforward case of communicative politics at its best, publicizing problems urgent within one sphere of social experience and deploying socially recognized norms to criticize them.

The feminist task of liberating women from heteronomy, domination, and exclusion of course did not conclude with the formal extension of the ‘rights of man’ to women, as Habermas recognizes, and it would be shortsighted to proclaim that these initial acts of communicative problematization had resolved the problems of feminine experience in modern society. “The formal equality that was partially

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<sup>345</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

<sup>346</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 374.{{50 Habermas, J· rgen 1996/s374; }}

achieved thereby only made the *de facto* unequal treatment of women all the more obvious,” and later generations of politically active women and their allies launched a second stage in feminist politics, devising positive social and legal programs for *actualizing* women’s rights.<sup>347</sup> Once again, however, Habermas insists that this struggle likewise demonstrates the power of communicative action against structurally ensconced forms of domination. Women’s access to the full liberties and resources of modern life is enabled not just through constitutional protections of their civil or political rights, but instead it must be supplemented with an array of specialized “social-welfare” policies that target the special circumstances women encounter by virtue of both their historical exclusion and their biological capacity of bearing children. These policies ideally would enable them, to name but a few examples, to exit abusive relationships with confidence, to enter the workplace as equal members of a profession, and to exercise control over their reproductive capacities. Following Habermas’ account, we might attribute the success of these policy innovations primarily to the communicative, publicizing activities of feminist women and their allies. The descriptive accounts of feminine subjection and *de facto* discrimination distributed in the popular press and media brought public attention to previously unthematized problems of social justice.

One further step is required to bring this story up to date, however, for as many contemporary feminist writers have pointed out of late, those innovative social-welfare programs of the mid- to late-twentieth century that were designed to enable women to pursue new, autonomously chosen life paths have themselves effected perverse, constraining consequences. Most notably, they subject women to particular, *normalized* conceptions of the various relationships, duties, and personal projects they ought to tend to. Social-welfare provisions like Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Medicaid, or Head Start are not simple gifts offered to single mothers to be used however they see fit; they are provided with a number of strings attached that serve to define a relatively narrow, state-supported definition of

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<sup>347</sup> Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” 209.

a responsible and productive woman's life. As Nancy Fraser has argued, these normalizing consequences of social-welfare programs, originally designed to support women's emancipation, are the result of an intensely political struggle over what resources women *need* in order to lead an autonomous and flourishing life. "Needs talk," Fraser writes, "appears as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive (and nondiscursive) resources compete to establish as hegemonic their respective interpretations of legitimate social needs."<sup>348</sup> All too frequently, the articulation of what needs bureaucratic programs of social support ought to recognize is undertaken in isolation from the populations these programs intend to serve, and the definition of needs derived from these expert-driven discussions is in turn applied to an over-generalized class of persons. The result, as Habermas concedes, is that "intended compensations turn into new forms of discrimination, and instead of being guaranteed liberties people are deprived of freedom."<sup>349</sup>

Already contained within Fraser's and Habermas' discussion of bureaucratic normalization, however, a potential discursive avenue for feminist politics again appears; for if new forms of constraint and discrimination have arisen in the categorization of legitimate and illegitimate needs, it is precisely the public, discursive definition of needs that feminist politics must engage in. By making public the manner in which bureaucratic support programs reinforce gender-specific norms of behavior, narrow down women's life choices, and subject welfare-recipients to paternalistic forms of oversight and control, feminists and welfare-rights activists can open the door for women to productively criticize how their needs have been defined for them. Through this work of problematization, activists can motivate the democratic citizenry to ask itself whether the constitutional commitments to equal opportunity and individual liberty require that the state reform its policies to recognize women's demands. Such a question can only be answered discursively with the informed contribution of those who will be affected

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<sup>348</sup> Fraser, "Struggle over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political Culture," 166.

<sup>349</sup> Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State," 209.

by the social-welfare provisions under scrutiny, and the aggrieved women must therefore engage in a discursive elaboration of the particular interests and needs—fundamental to their life experiences but perhaps invisible to men and some women—that continue to go unmet in liberal societies.<sup>350</sup>

Habermas thus envisions communicative politics leveraging open yet another realm for democratic problem-solving: the expert-driven agendas of social-welfare bureaucracies must be subject to public discussion and corresponding normative criticism, enabling the clients of the system to become simultaneously the agents of its deployment. Although many feminist critics have argued that this process of discursively articulating the needs of women's lives actually serves only to normalize their identities even further, Habermas contends that this process remains necessary for clarifying the protections and entitlements needed to support women's autonomy.<sup>351</sup> Furthermore, he argues that open procedures of public discussion enable all individuals an opportunity to contest and overcome any normalizing effects resulting from previous stases of communicative consensus; because public discourse never 'closes,' there will always be room for contestation, refinement, and reform. "The rights to unrestricted inclusion and equality built into liberal public spheres prevent exclusion mechanisms of the Foucauldian type and ground a potential for self-transformation."<sup>352</sup> As new protections and entitlements are extended to certain groups of citizens, those citizens raise their voices in criticism of the perverse effects of those well-intentioned governmental or legal actions, publicizing to the wider citizenry the manner in which purportedly liberatory measures deprive them of particular freedoms essential for a non-coerced life. Participants in the public sphere, by virtue of their participation in the public sphere, are thus empowered to critically analyze the social construction of their identities and their relationships, and they are given the opportunity to carve out a space for the

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>351</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*.

<sup>352</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 374.

liberated and autonomous reconstruction of their existence.<sup>353</sup> Many feminists, however, still remain unconvinced that communicative action contains the potential to solve lingering problems of gender identity and women's oppression, and it is their hesitation in the face of the historical promise of communicative politics that I believe merits further investigation.

## §2 The Internalized Limits of Communicative Politics

If Habermas' historical account of successful feminist struggles for recognition is compelling, is there any reason not to place our faith in the power of communicative problematization to overcome whatever new and emergent problems that we encounter today? One might of course reproach Habermas for the apparently naïve faith he places in the potential openness and egalitarianism of the public sphere; in a world where media empires like those of Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner rule the airwaves, where the entertainment and advertising industries unabashedly appease the lowest common desires of the consuming public, and where corporate interests prop up political candidates, it takes a particularly rosy pair of glasses to look on democratic discourse as a self-criticizing activity of informed opinion-formation. But Habermas is not unaware of these problems, and he is careful to remind his readers that the depiction he provides of the public sphere is but an *idealization*.<sup>354</sup> It is a description of the radical normative *potential* embedded in the communication structures of civil society, but this potential is presently inhibited by a variety of strategically oriented economic and as yet has not been fully activated by a thoroughgoing program of communicative socialization. In this sense, the dismissive criticism of the naïveté of communicative politics misses its target.

In another sense, however, this general line of criticism is of course apt. For while Habermas will not sustain the claim that the public sphere is already today an imminently effective agent of

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>354</sup> This has been a long-standing theme of Habermas' critical-philosophical analysis of society and politics, and it is one that his supporters have had to repeatedly emphasize in the face of dismissive readers. See, for example, McCarthy, "Translator's Introduction."

emancipatory politics, he does nevertheless stand by the assertion that the public sphere contains *within itself* the capacity to overcome the various distortions that prevent it from seizing its radical potential—and it is here that he might be more astutely accused of unwarranted idealism. Habermas' basic sociological distinction, between those economic and bureaucratic systems that manipulate and distort public discourse to achieve their own strategic goals and a cultural lifeworld that defines itself and its norms through discourse, implies that it is ultimately the communicative work of individuals engaged in discourse that has the power to legitimate political claims and direct public action. The distortions the public sphere and the lifeworld more generally fall prey to come from without, but the sources of distortion themselves would be subject to authoritative discursive oversight if the public engaged more fervently in communicative problematization. No agency other than the communicative power of the public possesses the normative resources or the public legitimacy needed to restructure economic relations, to call bureaucratic decision structures to account, or to mobilize the democratic public to redefine public goods.

Of course, if we ask the question of “how autonomous the public is when it takes a position on an issue, whether its affirmative or negative stance reflects a process of becoming informed or in fact only a more or less concealed game of power,” even Habermas must presently admit that public opinion is pushed rather brutally by distorting influences of money and power. Given his theoretical analysis of the communicative foundation of democratic power, however, Habermas insists that the remediation of this distortion can only come through the better cultivation of communicative capacities and relations within the public. Although he admits that the democratic potential of communication has not yet been fully realized, Habermas nevertheless proceeds upon the assumption “that public processes of communication can take place with less distortion the more they are left to the internal dynamic of a civil society that emerges from the lifeworld.”<sup>355</sup> Indeed, it is this indispensable assumption that guides

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<sup>355</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, 375.

his critical enterprise as such.

This almost messianic faith in the power of communication *as it emerges from the lifeworld*, however, is precisely what has given so many contemporary feminist writers pause, including even erstwhile allies of Habermas' such as Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser.<sup>356</sup> While Habermas may view lifeworld communication as the point of origin for egalitarian political norms—a zone free of the strategic power of social systems that allows for the free development of communicative capacities—feminist theorists have been far less optimistic about the possibility of deriving emancipatory critical tools out of that sphere. The thick relations of family and community that constitute the lifeworld, after all, have historically been the sites not of women's liberation, but of their domination and subjection, and it is questionable whether the communicative critical capacities that emerge out of a lifeworld distorted in these ways can ever transcend its origins in order to effectively problematize women's oppression.

Habermas' lifeworld theory idealizes family life as a zone of symbolically mediated social reproduction—that is, as a space structured by shared cultural understandings that enable individuals to internalize social identities and adopt intersubjective norms of cooperative interaction.<sup>357</sup> This normatively oriented practice of social integration is placed in stark opposition to the economic and administrative realms in which social relations are mediated strategically through competition for money or power. Within the lifeworld, shared understanding and ongoing communication battle serves as an immune system that fights against potential distortion of personal relations; only in systemic contexts of money and power, lacking in regulative communication, do we find pernicious sources of coercion and distortion. As Nancy Fraser argues, however, this analysis fails to account for the manifold ways in which the family itself is also mediated by “egocentric, strategic, and instrumental calculation”

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<sup>356</sup> See, for example, Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*; Fraser, “What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender.”

<sup>357</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 119–152.

and “usually exploitative exchanges of services, labor, cash, and sex” that coerce and oppress individual without obtaining communicative consent. She points out that “the household, like the paid workplace, is a site of labor, albeit unremunerated and often unrecognized labor,” and not just a site of affective relations of mutual recognition.<sup>358</sup> Indeed, such strategic exchange relationships are so fundamental to the historic functioning of the family that they cannot be dismissed out of hand as but distorting effect of systems rationality ‘colonizing’ the lifeworld. Echoing an insight of Hannah Arendt’s, Fraser further notes that it is precisely because there exists a familial sphere dedicated to the reproduction of life’s necessities—legitimated by norms that appear as culturally autochthonous—that the public realms of political interaction and commodity exchange are able to exist at all. The public sphere of civil society, in short, depends upon the unrecognized and frequently oppressive labor commonly performed by women in raising children and keeping house.<sup>359</sup>

What influence might this acknowledgement of the power relationships embedded in the lifeworld itself have upon communicative politics? While Fraser herself believes the problematic power relations of the lifeworld might still be effectively problematized by a culturally reflexive public sphere, other theorists—notably those working with a Foucaultian rather than a Habermasian toolbox—have observed that any supposed power of critical transcendence attributed to the public sphere is seriously compromised by its origins in those selfsame power relations. In other words, the power relations that constrain lifeworld identity formation might continue to beget occlusions, gaps, and oversights in the public processes of political communication itself, and social problems like women’s oppression that first appear in the familial sphere will resist effective problematization. In a recent book, philosopher Amy Allen has taken up this line of attack from an explicitly developmental angle, drawing on alternative accounts of subject formation from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to contest Habermas’ confidence

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<sup>358</sup> Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” 119–120.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



in the context-transcending power of communicative reason.<sup>360</sup> At the heart of Allen's argument is the crucial insight that the critical power of communicative politics is itself a product of the sometimes oppressive processes of socialization, individuation, and identity formation that occur in the lifeworld—and that communicative politics is thus subject to restraint by the contingencies of individuals' developmental history.

As this developmental hypothesis is the linchpin of Allen's confrontation with the potential limits of communicative politics, it is worth our while to reiterate briefly Habermas' account of how the critical power of communication emerges from the lifeworld at an individual level. In an interpretive adaptation of the social-psychological theories of both George Herbert Mead and Lawrence Kohlberg, Habermas describes the process responsible for the individual's recognition of universal communicative norms as an educative transition from the narrowly strategic interactions of childhood to the genuinely symmetrical reciprocity of adult moral cognition.<sup>361</sup> By participating in a variety of exchange relations as a developing child, an individual first gains a sense of herself as a repertoire of behaviors that are socially useful. Other subjects behave towards the developing individual as if she objectively inhabited a particularly defined social location—one that is constituted by her numerous relationships, dependencies, abilities, talents, etc.—and the child learns to negotiate her world by behaving in ways that will produce predictable consequences. She thus learns to internalize the objective identity provided to her by others as a social role, or a repertoire of behaviors and relationships that stabilize her interactions with the world.

As the child matures and begins to test out her role in practice, however, she also begins to understand that the individuality reflected back at her by others is not merely a static categorization, for she can appeal to behavioral expectation embedded in her identity to question the behaviors of others, or to question the structure of certain interaction. Social roles and contexts, the child realizes through

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<sup>360</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*.

<sup>361</sup> Habermas, "Individuation Through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead's Theory of Subjectivity."

these routes, are practical accomplishments that can be remade interactively. The recognition of selfhood that others give to her as she matures is more than just an acknowledgement of her sedimented personality characteristics and socially defined roles; it is an acknowledgement of a *communicative* capacity to contest interpretations of a shared reality, to appeal to mutually recognized norms, and to represent her own goals and concerns to a public audience.<sup>362</sup> In short, the objectified form of static identity first provided to the child by others is gradually replaced by a form of reflective linguistic agency within a socially constituted world. The child transitions from a self-understanding centered upon a given “me” to one centered upon an intersubjectively enabled “I.” It is this “I,” finally, that participates in the reciprocal practices of reason-giving that constitute the field of communicative politics.

Obviously, this ideal process of communicative identity formation, in which individuals are smoothly socialized into the critical processes of inquiry and discussion, is only possible within social settings that provide opportunities for children to ask for justifications of norms, to hear the claims of others, and to engage in an equal exchange of reasons. The rubric of education for communicative problematization is designed to ensure that all children are provided with such opportunities, encouraging active participation in cultural discourse by organizing the school through communication rather than arbitrary authority.<sup>363</sup> Amy Allen, however, argues that mere exposure to the discursive exchange of reasons late in the individual’s development may not be enough to cultivate critical communicative competencies, for even in postconventional societies, many individuals are *initially* socialized in familial contexts that do not give sovereign authority to the “forceless force of the better argument” or do not recognize the egalitarian norms of the democratic public sphere.<sup>364</sup> Most individuals, in fact, must pass through a

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<sup>362</sup> These three forms of communicative action reflect the three zones of lifeworld understanding articulated by Habermas: the objective, the intersubjective, and the subjective. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*, 119–152.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–197.

<sup>364</sup> See chapter 5 of Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*.

developmental stage in which they adopt a purely conventional, reified identity formation provided to them by the authority of parents or extended family members, and even though these conventionally formed subjects are later exposed to a wider communicative sphere, many will find it difficult to rationally criticize the objectifying identities provided to them through the long process of socialization. Such individuals become *attached* to the stable identities that enable early social interaction, even when these identities relegate them to inferior, subordinate social positions. The goal of communicative socialization is hampered, in such cases, by an uncriticized remainder of heteronomous beliefs, habits, roles, or desires left over from earlier stages of identity development—a lifeworld *residuum* as Husserl once dubbed it—that *resists* the scrutiny of public discourse.<sup>365</sup> The case of feminine subjection, once again, proves illustrative for understanding how these residual structures resist communicative criticism.

Recounting the frustration felt by many second-wave feminists and their theoretical heirs, Allen notes that despite achieving notable success in humanistic and social scientific discourses, the rational critique of feminine identity as a socially constructed artifact of Western culture has found little traction in the culture at large. While many feminist activists still assume that “once we have recognized that our beliefs about gender and sex have been exposed as contingent, it will be easy to dismantle these belief systems, thus undermining the systems of dominance and subordination with which they are intertwined,” the rise of a reactionary anti-feminist women’s movement in the 1980s gives the lie to this cognitivist assumption.<sup>366</sup> Many women who were raised within oppressive domestic environments in which they were denied opportunities to educate themselves and to explore possible career paths outside of the domestic realm do not perceive emancipatory feminist politics as a liberatory movement lobbying for their interests. Nor indeed do they even perceive it as a legitimate exercise in self-definition that other women should be free to undertake. They view the attempt by some women to

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<sup>365</sup> Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

<sup>366</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, 80. The terminology of “anti-feminist women’s movement” is borrowed from Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” 135.

expand the repertoire of social possibilities for all women instead as an attack on the culturally sacred identity of women as caretakers, mothers or wives; it is an attack on the identities they have adopted for themselves as an essential ingredient in their socialized individuality.<sup>367</sup>

Allen contends that we cannot write off this resistance to the critique of identity as merely a “pathology” of a lifeworld infected by strategic rationality. It is not a dysfunctionality to be overcome through continued giving and taking of reasons in the public sphere. Indeed, it is precisely the problematization of traditional identities through the give and take of reasons in the public sphere that movements such as the anti-feminist movement reject outright. On Habermas’ account of identity formation and moral development, we would have to describe these women as having identities ‘stuck’ at the conventional stage of socialization, unwilling to offer a discursive justification of their identities or to hear a critique by others; but Allen notes that this account overlooks the deep emotional attachment many women have formed to what appear to be from the outside to be restrictive, oppressive, or regressive identities. It is not the case that these women are simply unaware of the life possibilities that might be available to them outside of the traditionally defined domestic sphere; they frequently choose to valorize and defend these identities precisely in the face of expanded opportunities. Citing Judith Butler, Allen explains that we develop attachments to the social norms that provided us with our first, conventionally recognized sense of self because this normalized role “provides me my identity and thus my social existence. In other words, my desire for my own existence, my desire to desire, provides the motivation for my acceptance of the term by which I am hailed.”<sup>368</sup> Non-communicative identity formations are sources of stability and self-understanding that communicative criticism threatens to undermine without providing equally stable alternatives. It is no wonder that elements of the democratic public frequently reassert the non-negotiable validity of tradition and convention in the face

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<sup>367</sup> The aggressive opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and other feminist political programs by conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly is exemplary of this trend. See, for example, Schlafly, *Feminist Fantasies*.

<sup>368</sup> {{55 Allen, Amy 2008/s78; }} The Butler work that Allen references here is {{59 Butler, Judith 1997; }} See chapters 3 and 4 in particular.

of identity-troubling social movements. By revealing conventional identity formations as contingent, arbitrary, or historically idiosyncratic, communicative politics assaults the supposedly natural foundations upon which many individuals have built their lives and reveals them to be non-necessary.

Allen's point in criticizing the inability of Habermas' theory of socialization to account for these residual identity attachments seems to indicate the limits of a purely communicative feminist politics. Insofar as women's autonomy depends upon the communicative elucidation of the interests, needs, and relationships integral to their identities, such a political project will always encounter an impassioned rearguard resistance on the part of women who have "attached" to social roles that Allen characterizes as "subordinating." This rearguard resistance is troubling not only because it represents an unwillingness by some to engage in democratic debate; more importantly, it also hinders the ability of other, democratically engaged parties from airing their grievances or problems.

Lest this analysis of attachment appear a simple product of cosmopolitan prejudice against "traditional" social roles, it must also be noted that these "psychic obstacles to the exercise of autonomy" are not confined to the group of women raised in situations of the most drastic subjugation to male authority. There is no clean line of demarcation between a group of emancipated women, liberated from "subordinating modes of identity," and a group of subjugated women still under the sway these injurious identities.<sup>369</sup> Recounting the reactions of one Cornell University professor upon discovering the negative body image held by many of her students, Allen notes that there are "young women who identify themselves as feminists, who understand and endorse feminist critiques of the norms and ideals of feminine beauty," and yet "who nonetheless find their own sense of self shaped (negatively) by how much they weigh, what size they wear, and how big their thighs are."<sup>370</sup> Even within a community of engaged, critical inquirers, there persist elements of reified social identities that are

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<sup>369</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, 119.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. The original source for these observations is Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*.

resistant to change through communicative criticism.

This final insight is perhaps the most troubling for a democratic theory that relies on the participation of a diverse public to highlight emergent problems, as Habermas' does. Allen's frank acknowledgement of the continued influence of non-communicative power relations upon the self-understanding of *all* communicative subjects—even those who have accepted the need for a rational critique of their identities—impugns Habermas' faith that all normative conflicts and social dissatisfactions can be aired and negotiated through the medium of critical discourse. Even those subjects who have been educationally prepared to engage in a thoroughgoing rational critique of their social experience will maintain attachments to problematic identity structures, and they will passionately fight against discursive attempts to problematize those attachments. Because the process of subject formation necessarily entails the shaping of an individual's sense of his own needs or desires *pre-communicatively*, every individual's self-understanding might continue to rely upon uncriticized identity structures long after he has matured to a stage of communicative autonomy in which he might criticize his upbringing. Indeed, not only do these pre-formed needs and desires persist, they form a constitutive identity complex that individuals will often vigorously defend in the face of public criticism. Every communicative subject—emancipated or oppressed, independent or dependent—understands himself through a lens that is not entirely of his own making, and he scrutinizes that lens only at a potentially great social and psychic cost.<sup>371</sup>

It bears mentioning, furthermore, that Allen's critique of communicative occlusions does not just apply to the case of feminist politics. There are today a great number of political struggles other than feminist politics that also hinge upon a critique of individuals' perceptions of their own needs, or the

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<sup>371</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, 121, 132. Quoting Johanna Meehan, Allen writes, "'All processes of socialization, no matter how benign or rational, require a psychic subjugation that is almost inevitably blind and furious,' and the costs of that subjugation arguably resurface in the forms of violence, hatred, aggression, and irrationality that persistently frustrate our attempts to achieve justice."

repertoire of social relationships they perceive as essential to their lives, and which therefore are subject to the same mechanisms of resistance to communicative critique described by Allen. The politics of welfare policy, of multicultural recognition, of environmental conservation, and of consumerism, to name a few examples, all involve an attempt to redefine what goods individuals believe are necessary to their existence, or what social interactions and connections they view to be supportive or destructive of their cultural identities. Similarly to the situation of feminist politics, the environmental and anti-globalization movements have likewise encountered deep-seated resistance to their attempts to call into question the consumer's perception of his own needs by demonstrating the destructive environmental and global economic consequences of satisfying those needs. Not only does the public disagree with the environmentalists' admittedly partisan interpretations of responsible consumption; they resist the idea that consumption might even be an appropriate topic for political conversation. Unlike the situation of feminist politics, however, the profound resistance to communicative dialogue encountered by movements like the environmental movement does not stem from the internalization of an inherently dominating identity complex. The needs and relationships that environmentalists call into question are not obviously elements of an individual's identity that are installed by way of oppressive parents, families, or communities, but they are nevertheless identity formations that many individuals hold outside of the field of politics. From the environmentalist's situated perspective, this act of withholding represents a dangerous restriction of the scope of democratic politics, undermining the ability for the public to cope with an emergent problem with very real and socially very widespread consequences.

Not only in the case of the oppressive socialization of women, but also in the socialized construction of individual's habits of consumption and environmental interaction, communicative problematization is circumscribed in advance by deep-seated identity attachments that keep some social problems off the agenda of civic discourse. Even when individuals have been educated to engage in communicative

critique, to examine their social experience and weigh it against rationally recognized normative standards, they persist in protecting particular problematic identity structures from public scrutiny. Communicative politics, it would appear, is subject to insidious occlusions that limit the public's ability to publicize problems developing within its own constitutive relationships. It is in the hope of radicalizing democratic politics to push beyond these lingering attachments that some scholars are attracted to a more aggressive strand of political education. If communicative preparation is not enough to foster a democratic public ready to cope with its most pressing contemporary problems, then perhaps there is a need to cultivate a higher degree of critical reflexivity through the schools.

### **§3 Expanding Communicative Politics: The Challenge of Critical Pedagogy**

Allen's critique of the limits of communicative politics presents a significant challenge to the efficacy of educating young citizens for communicative problematization. If some contemporary social problems—like those concerns highlighted by recent feminist and environmental movements—are shielded from vigorous public contestation by unexamined identity attachments, then the discursive democratic public is to that extent hobbled in its capacity to cope with exigent social tensions. Further, if the occluding identity attachments described by Allen are in fact a regular or even necessary part of communicative development, then it would seem that the obstacles to effective problematization are indigenous to the process of communication itself. Because communicative socialization requires an initial, non-communicative internalization of a social identity, then the occlusions caused by the affective attachment to this identity are internally constitutive of the communicative public. Educating children to engage in communicative problematization, in this light, only equips the democratic public for a limited form of inquiry and reconstruction, and whole dimensions of social experience (personal consumption, women's roles in the household, property usage, etc.) are ignored or indefinitely tabled by parties who refuse to entertain any scrutiny of their identity-defining practices. To further bolster



the critical capacities of the democratic public, education might need to push past a purely communicative model of problematization and ensure that students engage in more radical forms of reflexive self-criticism that problematize individual's persistent identity attachments in search of complete rational autonomy.

One prominent educational response to the limits of communicative democratic politics has been offered by the loosely affiliated group of scholars known as "critical pedagogues," who endorse a Marxist critique of deliberative politics that focuses on the socio-economic constraints to open democratic communication. Peter McLaren, a self-described "revolutionary critical pedagogue," has criticized the attempt by progressive educators to prepare students for democratic participation in the public sphere on the grounds that this approach does not actively attack the structural sources of oppression and inequality that colonize children's consciousness. "[S]o much of this discourse involve[s] pedagogically fostering a respect for the values of democratic citizenship and appealing to moral sentiments and critical reasoning," McLaren writes. "Of course, this is bound to fail because it rests on an appeal to the individual's consciousness—a move that does little to parry the most devastating effects of capital and is ineffective in bringing about capital's inaction."<sup>372</sup> An individual's consciousness in a capitalist society, the argument goes, is determined by a number of heteronomous forces of ideological manipulation and social domination: identity-constitutive practices of consumption are manipulated through advertising and peer pressure;<sup>373</sup> artificial racial self-images are made to seem natural through historically contingent socio-economic conditions;<sup>374</sup> traditional gender roles are maintained both by the exploitative structure of wage-labor and by the lingering legal endorsement of patriarchy.<sup>375</sup> Because the critical consciousness and social awareness of individuals is deeply influenced

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<sup>372</sup> McLaren, "Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy."

<sup>373</sup> McLaren and Sandlin, *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption*; Giroux and Pollock, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*.

<sup>374</sup> Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'White Privilege'."

<sup>375</sup> Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class, and Power*.

by these various identity-shaping social forces, the public that forms out of such ideologically manipulated individuals has little autonomous critical power to question the activities of the state or market.<sup>376</sup> Communicative problematization is powerless to attack the true sources of contemporary social problems if individuals do not first problematize the heteronomous sources of their own beliefs, desires, and values, and it is this incumbent upon conscientious teachers to awaken their students to their own ideological indoctrination. The goals of political education ought to be more radically emancipatory.

Critical pedagogues, accordingly, have lobbied passionately for a more radical reconsideration of the role of the teacher and the purpose of the curriculum in preparing students for political life. As McLaren explains, “revolutionary critical pedagogy is committed to creating an emancipatory culture of schooling that empowers nondominant students by recognizing the global capitalist structures determining who can have power and must work for those in power.”<sup>377</sup> Students must confront the inauthentic and destructive nature of their consumerist desires, for example, by recognizing the “global capitalist structures” that fabricate those desires for the benefit of corporate profits. Only once an individual has deciphered the external source of his own product-mania and to some extent detached from those passions will he then further be able to effectively problematize the destructive consequences of consumer culture on himself and others. In pursuit of effecting this revelatory emancipation, the teacher guides students dialectically towards acts of self-criticism, seeking “to un-conceal operations of economic and political power underlying the concrete details and representations of our lives.” The result of this inquiry, McLaren asserts, will be a more profound understanding of how social differences of gender, race, and class are all promoted by capitalist “exploitation of the division of labor,” and consequently a psychological detachment from these harmful categories.<sup>378</sup> The moment of “un-

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<sup>376</sup> McLaren, “Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy,” 7.

<sup>377</sup> McLaren, Smith, and Ryoo, “A Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century,” 71.

<sup>378</sup> McLaren, “Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy,” 10.

concealment” is essential in the critical pedagogical model, for it is the recognition of the heteronomous influence of hegemonic power on one’s own life that emancipates the individual’s consciousness and enables him to participate more openly and honestly in the democratic governance of his society. Only students who have overcome heteronomy and who have chosen to endorse only those beliefs and norms they can autonomously legitimate are fully prepared for democratic participation.

Critical pedagogy thus promotes intensive scrutiny of the construction of one’s own identity, as well as an inquiry into the social problems bound up with personal desires and self-image, but it does so in large part through the expansion of the teacher’s agency in the classroom. The teacher becomes a sort of dialectical guide, constantly redirecting students’ inquiry back towards the construction of their own identities in order to reveal the root sources of disempowerment and violence implanted within individual consciousness by dominant socio-economic powers. It is precisely this expansion of the teacher’s role, however, that constitutes the primary danger and contradiction of the critical pedagogical model, for there is but a thin conceptual distinction between a type of pedagogical guidance that encourages the autonomous selection of beliefs and values and a type of pedagogical control that steers students towards foreordained conclusions. Indeed, beneath the vaunted goal of educating students for complete critical autonomy there lurks a persistent contradiction: how can emancipation from heteronomy be induced by a heteronomous guide? How can critical *autonomy* be taught?

The central goal of critical pedagogical intervention, to reiterate, is to liberate the individual from the heteronomous and oppressive forces of capital and social inequality. By guiding individuals through a reflexive examination of their own self-perceptions and social understandings, the critical pedagogue can help them root out internalized sources of oppression, revealing to them the disguised channels of influence that allow corporate entities and class structures to sculpt their beliefs and desires and to steer their behavior. Ideally, such a radical educational practice merely removes cultural blinders built

into the identity of the individual from childhood, enabling a wider degree of autonomous thought, critical problematization, and collective social action. From a more skeptical perspective, however, it is arguably the case that critical pedagogy achieves emancipation from hegemony only by substituting a new form of heteronomous consciousness-construction—the teacher, rather than “global capitalist structures,” becomes the agent in charge of shaping individuals’ identities and values.<sup>379</sup> It is the teacher, after all, who initiates the reflexive consideration of consumer desire; it is the teacher who carefully crafts questions that steer students back to an analysis of economic structures; and when old identity structures are revealed to be inauthentic or fabricated, it is the teacher who supplies a new, Marxist vocabulary for interpreting social reality. Has the student who learns to recognize the ideological influence of capital on his own consciousness torn off his cultural blinders, or has he merely traded one set of unexamined assumptions in for another, equally unexamined set provided to him by his teacher?

McLaren is of course careful to insist that critical pedagogy is a dialectical encounter through which the teacher exercises no controlling discursive power; classroom dialogue approaches a plane of equality as the teacher criticizes his own identity complexes in tandem with his students. It is difficult, however, to square this picture of open ended co-inquiry with McLaren’s confident prescription of the radical results such inquiry must reach. Because oppression by capitalist ideology is simply a fact about contemporary life, on McLaren’s account, students who engage in a properly critical dialogue will necessarily come to particular realizations about the structure of capitalist power. McLaren urgently insists that it is the obligation of “conscientious educators” to fly “under the radar” and “subvert the system from the inside out,” for without engaging in a critique of capital, students will never penetrate to the depths of their own identities.<sup>380</sup> McLaren’s confidence in the validity of his Marxist analysis of social distortion allows him to equate the critique of “global capitalist structures” with the attainment of

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<sup>379</sup> Burbules and Berk, “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits.”

<sup>380</sup> McLaren, Smith, and Ryoo, “A Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century,” 60.

autonomy as such, but of course for anyone who views current social problems from another analytical perspective—or who even harbors the smallest doubt about Marxist ideology critique—the contradictions in McLaren’s vision of autonomy are harder to ignore. In order to liberate students from one type of subjugation and ideological manipulation by external economic power, critical pedagogues deploy another type of pedagogical manipulation to steer students towards a particular set of political realizations.

Admittedly, some critical pedagogues have attended to this internal tension within their model more carefully than others, although the contradictions inherent to the project of educating individuals for autonomy remain intractable. Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, by most accounts the father of critical pedagogy, confronts precisely this issue of pedagogical domination in his landmark text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writing:

Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore, action *with* the oppressed. Those who work for liberation must not take advantage of the emotional dependence of the oppressed—dependence that is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surround them and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world...The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own *conscientização*.<sup>381</sup>

Freire’s concept of *conscientização* is designed specifically to overcome the contradictions inherent to the notion of an emancipatory pedagogy. Freire’s neologism might be rendered in English as ‘conscientization,’ or roughly translated as ‘consciousness-raising,’ although the propagandistic overtones of the latter undercut the full complexity of the term. Conscientization—the educational goal of Freire’s critical pedagogy—is the process of an individual coming to recognize the impact of broad

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<sup>381</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 67.

socio-economic structures upon his interpretation of the world and the norms by which he judges his experience. Freire insists, however, that this process of recognition must be the product of a critical, intersubjective dialogue that allows for rational validation of claims, rather than being a monological lesson that the student accepts on the ground of uncriticized authority.

While formal educational processes rely upon a teacher who “deposits” knowledge in the minds of learners, Freire refuses the power dichotomy of teacher/student and instead attempts to open a dialogue between “teacher-students” and “student-teachers” concerning social problems or cultural objects of mutual concern. The facilitating teacher-student begins the exchange by asking what topics his co-participants would like to discuss, thereby allowing student-teachers to set the class agenda, and he subsequently provides resources and information for informed debate between classmates, as well as asks probing questions that reveal hidden assumptions. Rather than steering the conversation to a foreordained conclusion, the teacher ideally tries only to articulate more concisely and pointedly the problems that arise in the course of dialogue in order to encourage deeper levels of reflection. By this strategy of limited dialogical intervention, Freire hopes to overcome the problem of pedagogical dominance, making the teacher a co-inquirer or, at most, a facilitator of a largely student-driven dialogue.<sup>382</sup> Whatever claims the teacher makes, or whatever critical conclusions his questions imply, they possess the same status within the educational dialogue as students’ contributions, and they are subject to the same process of critical scrutiny and validation.

Freire’s model of “teacher-student” and “student-teacher” dialogue, however, was developed while teaching literacy to adult peasants in the Brazilian countryside, and it is only in the context of such a dynamic, communicative exchange between adults that his contention that a teacher exercises no undue, indoctrinating influence over student dialogue appears even *prima facie* plausible. Whether or not we concur that such a facilitative, non-subordinating role of “teacher-student” is in fact possible

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 93.

even in an educational exchange between adults, it at least seems clear that transposing this role into the standard classroom erects an insurmountable set of barriers to maintaining discursive equality. Most obviously, the institutional context of the school itself gives the teacher a set of powers that no other participant possesses, and which give a prejudicial non-communicative weight to his dialogic contributions. The institution of the school empowers the teacher through grades and disciplinary sanctions to stand as the ultimate arbiter of truth, for at the close of the class day it is he alone who distributes credit for lessons learned; the conclusions of classroom dialogue are never free of irrational, non-communicative distortion so long as the teacher retains this power. Even in a radically revised educational setting where the teacher abdicated these trappings of institutional power, however, other power differentials would remain. The simple disparities of age, argumentative facility, and educational certification will still always undermine the relations of discursive equality necessary for non-indoctrinating *conscientização* to be possible. As teacher and scholar Eric Freedman has noted, “as the leaders of discussion, teachers have a great ability—certainly greater than any of the students have—to determine how social issues get interpreted in the classroom.” The relative weight of an educated adult’s communicative contributions amongst a group of adolescents will stymie even the most committed critical pedagogue’s attempt to become a simple “facilitator” or “co-inquirer,” and because this power is rooted in the teacher’s cognitive capacities it is essentially impossible to abdicate. “True dialogue” between teacher and students in the classroom remains perpetually elusive.<sup>383</sup>

The teacher can of course seek to forestall the indoctrinating effects of his presence by remaining silent, allowing the dialogue of *conscientização* to unfold without his contributions, but this approach resolves the problem of pedagogical power only by abandoning the substantive aims of critical education. Without the work of a facilitator to guide student conversation, nudging them constantly back towards an analysis of the disguised influences of economy and ideology that shape their beliefs,

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<sup>383</sup> Freedman, “Is Teaching for Social Justice Undemocratic?,” 444, 450.

there is no guarantee that classroom dialogue will question any of the identity structures that critical pedagogues believe must be analyzed. Freedman's insights into classroom dynamics are pertinent yet again:

If the teacher abdicates her power to control the direction of classroom discussion...then we no longer have any reason to assume that students will learn a method of analysis that interrogates systems of oppression from a Marxist or feminist standpoint. Depending on who is enrolled in the course, the students' conversations might yield a decidedly racist or classist interpretation of events...<sup>384</sup>

The arduous work of criticizing one's own desires, beliefs, and assumptions is not a task that students will often undertake on their own initiative, and an unguided, open-ended discourse between students is more likely to reiterate and confirm internalized biases than it is to problematize them. Rather than consciousness-raising, we have simple consciousness confirmation. Critical pedagogy's critical goals cannot be achieved in the real world classroom setting without the intervention of a teacher who ushers students into domains of dialogue they would otherwise neglect and who balances voices in the classroom. The guiding hand of the teacher is thus indispensable for leading students towards critical autonomy, even as it is this compelling guidance that simultaneously threatens to undermine the independence of their critical insights.

Critical pedagogues' enthusiasm for inculcating autonomy and liberating the political consciousness of their students leads them to ignore the subtle contradiction that persists between their methods and their goals—between, that is, the deployment of pedagogical power and their stated emancipatory aims. If the goal of critical pedagogy is to have students examine the construction of their own beliefs and to recognize the heteronomous sources of their own identities, then the work of guidance and critical insight provided by the teacher is necessary. It is the teacher who selects and dismisses topics

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 445.



for conversation; it is the teacher who must present stubborn identity complexes with the evidence that questions their viability; and it is the teacher who supplements student conversations with unrepresented positions. Without these directorial interventions, classroom conversation will not dig deeply into the identities of its participants and reveal the heteronomous sources of their beliefs and desires. And yet, by exercising the power of pedagogical guidance, the critical teacher cannot help but transfer to his students his own idiosyncratic set of analytic tools, recommending to them one particular way of interpreting social events or one particular political ideology. Students might accordingly come to recognize the influence of corporate messaging, gender stereotyping, or the media's portrayal of racial characteristics upon their own interpretation of the world, but they achieve these victories in critical awareness only by adopting a new set of interpretive tools that might themselves be recalcitrant to reflexive questioning. The supposed emancipation from heteronomous beliefs and values that *conscientização* provides will frequently be purchased at the price of a new, equally heteronomous set of critical categories encouraged by the student's pedagogical guide.

While many critical pedagogues remain comfortable with their depiction of the teacher as benevolent facilitator, at least some scholars—notably including Eric Freedman—have acknowledged that the tensions that persist between the teacher's power and the goals of emancipatory education are problematic.<sup>385</sup> By fixating on the ideal of a completely autonomous identity formation and whitewashing the role of the teacher as the facilitator of emancipation, critical pedagogues dangerously stretch the educational relationship beyond its legitimate exercise, and they grant to the educator an unexamined and unmonitored power to inculcate in students particular forms of social analysis. In order to rein in these excesses, Freedman suggests, two essential safeguards must be adopted within the program of critical pedagogy that subject the power of the pedagogue to critical scrutiny. First and most importantly, rather than teaching students a certain set of substantive conclusions about the

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<sup>385</sup> Freire himself increasingly acknowledged this tension in his later thought. Cf. Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race."

structure of their identity or the problems of their society, critical educators are tasked with teaching *multiple* modes of social analysis, any one of which might directly conflict with the views that the teacher him or herself believes to be correct. McLaren, and to a lesser extent Freire, stipulated a particular set of revelations as essential to the emancipatory educational process: recognizing the influence of “global capitalist structures” on consumerist desire, for instance, or acknowledging the “asymmetrical social and economic distribution of wealth” as an oppressive limitation on life opportunities.<sup>386</sup> In reaction to the indoctrinating danger of pedagogical power, however, Freedman asserts that teachers must also introduce their students to alternative modes of social analysis that can be justified through public dialogue; Marxist and feminist as well as neoliberal or religious conservative are included in the conversation. Teaching numerous critical perspectives does not compel students to overturn their pre-existing cultural or communal commitments, but it does open a forum for them to dialogically test out the agreements and conflicts that arise between their own worldviews and the perspectives of others. The persuasion of rational discourse, rather than the subtle compulsion of pedagogical influence, ideally determines what views students will ultimately select for adoption. Secondly, Freedman also argues that the selection of social problems and analytic perspectives to be explored in the classroom must itself be subject to broader democratic consultation; it is not the prerogative of the teacher alone to decide what perspectives are reasonable positions to include in a curriculum for critical advancement. A public of concerned adult speakers, engaged in an open discussion over the aims of the curriculum, is given this power instead. The democratic public, not the rogue “conscientious educator” is tasked with constructing a curriculum that provides for continued democratic dialogue, and it is this body that possesses final jurisdiction over what viewpoints students need familiarity with in order to participate effectively in democratic discourse.

Freedman’s suggestions for democratically revising critical pedagogy, I believe, present an effective

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<sup>386</sup> McLaren, Smith, and Ryoo, “A Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century”; Freire and Macedo, “A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race.”

solution to the anti-democratic dangers of pedagogical power, and because they help reform the critical pedagogical movement into a more effective force of educational change, they deserve more discussion than can be offered here. The central observation that is important for the purposes of this inquiry, however, is that Freedman resolves the inner tensions of critical pedagogy only by abandoning some of its more radical emancipatory goals in deference to the internal limits of the pedagogical relationship. The school can in fact serve as a site for constructing critical political agency, but the pedagogical quest for autonomy reaches an insurmountable limit when the heteronomous intervention of the teacher is required to promote critical realizations. If the impetus and direction of critique originates from the singular influence of the teacher, then the “autonomy” of the students’ realizations is irredeemably cast under suspicion. Rather than autonomously validated beliefs and values, the student of critical pedagogy might only be adopting one more set of heteronomous identity attachments chosen capriciously by his teacher and not subject to discursive evaluation. The power of pedagogy can assist individuals in adopting new perspectives on the world, or in weighing the value of competing perspectives, but the quest to pedagogically liberate individuals from heteronomy overshoots the power of education and mires itself in contradiction.

In recognition of this internal limitation to pedagogy, Freedman adopts an alternative vision of discursive agency to be advanced through the school, strikingly similar to the view of communicative problematization advanced in this dissertation. If radical autonomy—emancipation from all heteronomous influences on identity and belief—cannot be obtained, Freedman argues that the school can nevertheless give students the critical skills of communication that will allow them to deliver and receive public acts of critique. Through the standard lifeworld processes of socialization, young individuals will inevitably attach themselves to beliefs and values that constitute a more or less heteronomous identity complex, Freedman recognizes; but it is not the job of the school to unmake these identities in the name of complete autonomy. Indeed, some schools might even legitimately

reinforce elements of these identities through processes of cultural socialization, so long as they also introduce students into the sphere of public communication where alternative beliefs, values, and identities are represented in discourse. Education for participation in discourse does not force individuals to re-dig the foundations of their identity, but it does give them the disposition to listen to critical claims made by others, as well as the tools to weigh the validity of varying social perspectives against their own beliefs and available evidence. Furthermore, Freedman's model of educating for communicative democratic agency is itself susceptible to communicative validation in the broader public sphere. The school is responsible for preparing students for participation in discourse, and it must do so through methods that can themselves be democratically legitimated.

In short, to retain democratic legitimacy, critical pedagogical strategies must be reigned in and teachers must return to the work of preparing students for communicative problematization. Students will be directed to engage with the pressing social problems that plague their communities; they will deploy normative standards in discourse to criticize the present constitution of social life; and they will communicate with their peers in a joint inquiry into the causes of social problems. Furthermore, students will be exposed to a variety of different normative and critical perspectives on their social world; although they need not accept any particular perspectives as authoritative, they must be able to listen to and comprehend the claims of these perspectives when raised in discourse with their peers. Lastly, the rubric of problems to be analyzed and critical perspectives to encounter will be determined through an ongoing democratic dialogue concerning the knowledge and skills needed for the continued discursive life of the public. Through an internal revision of critical pedagogy, we have arrived once again at the inherently limited form of critical education that advances the civic skill of discursive problematization.

#### **§4 Expanding Communicative Politics: Beyond the School**

This short investigation into the radically emancipatory program of critical pedagogy has taken us out beyond the limits of democratic education and back again. The goal of inculcating complete critical autonomy through the school, I have argued, illegitimately extends the reach of pedagogical power out beyond the school's capabilities, grasping towards an ultimately illusory educational goal of liberating developing individuals from all uncritically internalized identity attachments. The power relations internal to the pedagogical relationship make education an inherently heteronomous enterprise, and the radical teacher's attempt to liberate his students from economic or ideological heteronomy can only be supported by disguising the dangers of pedagogical power that lurk beneath the surface of emancipatory rhetoric. Rather than continuing to pursue the dream of complete critical autonomy through the school, a goal which requires us to fundamentally misrecognize education's heteronomous structure, democratic educators must proclaim a more limited vision of critical communicative agency. The school cannot liberate students from all unexamined identity attachments, but it can usher them into the world of democratic discourse where beliefs, values, and attachments are subjected to ongoing intersubjective scrutiny. While this more parsimonious program of communicative education may not radically liberate each and every child from problematic identity formations, it does foster the existence of a public that, with the tools of dialogue and rational argumentation, can continue to contest identity attachments into the future.

By restraining the power of the pedagogue to a form of communicative preparation, however, and by subordinating the curriculum of critique to wider democratic scrutiny, the program of communicative democratic education is susceptible once again to the charge that it perpetuates vicious occlusions within the scope of political action. The source of criticality in the democratic classroom, after all, does not reside with the insight of an experienced pedagogue who directs student discussion back towards the influence of economics, social hierarchies, or ideology upon their beliefs and practices; instead, the depth of the critique undertaken in the classroom is wholly dependent upon the variety of perspectives

approved to be taught by the public, as well as by the vigor of the argumentation and discourse that takes place in actual classroom dialogue. The critical impact of education is entirely bound, therefore, by the critical force of communication in the wider public sphere, and as a result, there is no guarantee that oppressive, manipulative, or socially destructive identity attachments will be uprooted and exposed. Indeed, the dynamics of the democratic public might make some forms of critical identity exploration entirely off-limits to classroom exploration. Students will be exposed to a variety of critical social perspectives representative of the democratic public—like the perspectives of environmentalism, feminism, Marxism, and anti-racism—but because the teacher’s legitimate area of pedagogical concern is only to ensure that such perspectives are given their air-time in ongoing classroom dialogue, there is no available pedagogical mechanism that would force students to “overcome” their consumer desires, their internalized gender roles, or their racial or ethnic stereotypes. Indeed, any attempt to pass each and every student through a more rigorous and thoroughgoing form of self-critique would have to once again transcend the democratic limits of the school, placing in the hands of the teacher an undue power over the formation of individual beliefs, desires, and aspirations.

Democratic education through the school system cannot guarantee the comprehensive criticality of the democratic public, and the discourse that is enabled by a program of education for communicative problematization will be perpetually open to the charge that it has artificially fenced off some areas of social life from public scrutiny. Democratic citizens maintain attachments to gender roles, patterns of consumption, relations to nature, ethnic identities, or religious practices that they may struggle to keep off the agenda of democratic discourse, even as other segments of the public insist that these practices or beliefs are at the root of urgent social problems like domestic violence, natural resource depletion, abuse of non-human animals, and even ethnic neighborhood segregation. Education cannot forcibly place these issues back upon the agenda of public debate without exceeding its democratic warrant, and it is only the temptation of the educational ‘panacea’ that would lead us to reconstruct the school for

this radical critical capacitation.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the failure of the school to promote complete critical autonomy is not a failure of democracy as such. Simply because the school is not the appropriate venue for questioning problematic identity attachments does not entail that these attachments are sacrosanct or eternally beyond the reach of democratic contestation. Democratic critique of these attachments does in fact take place, as the bare presence of radical feminist, anti-globalization, and deep ecological movements attest. However, because the political claims advanced by these groups call into question deep-seated identity attachments—gender roles, consumption patterns, and human-nature dichotomies—activists are often forced to choose avenues of critique chosen that transcend the boundaries of purely communicative action. Self-proclaimed queer activists problematize reigning gender norms by remixing “normal” bodily mannerisms, clothing, and linguistic patterns in order to make visible the arbitrariness of the conglomeration of characteristics that the general population has dubbed “man” or “woman.” Anti-globalization leaders seek to remake dominant patterns of consumption by promoting new patterns of sustainable and local consumption, luring consumer’s desires down new paths of economic cooperation. Deep ecologists and some indigenous groups contest the economic development of natural spaces by publicly demonstrating their affective ties to natural entities, peacefully chaining themselves to trees or blocking access to logging roads.

In each of these cases, radical critics of contemporary life find ways to bring new items onto the democratic agenda and to highlight social problems the broader public largely ignores, but they do not rely strictly upon the give and take of reasons and arguments that constitutes the communicative life of the democratic public sphere. Because deep ecologists, queer activists and other similarly radical groups call into question practices or beliefs that reside at the heart of dominant identity-structures, their attempts at strictly communicative problematization gain little traction. The affective attachments to consumption, gender, and the exploitation of nature are often immune to purely linguistic

contestation. Instead of simply advancing rational arguments concerning the unsustainability of present resource depletion, or instead of merely asserting the legitimacy of alternative forms of sexual desire, radical critics are forced to move outside of the sphere of communication to bring attention to the problems they confront in their social experience, exploring novel modes of performance, testimony, and demonstrative experimentation to render present problems visible and make future alternatives attractive.

Radical contestation of unexamined identity attachments, therefore, can and does take place within the broader context of the democratic public sphere, but this work is not advanced through the agency of the school. Instead, the critique of desire, of habit, and of identity is undertaken by a dispersed set of individual democratic participants who are personally motivated to confront the public through extra-communicative demonstrations as a consequence of the resistance they have encountered in airing their grievances through traditional channels. These are the democratic agents whom Michel Foucault, adopting language from the ancient Athenian theory of democracy, labels “*parrhesiastes*,” or frank speakers, in light of their courageous commitment to publicizing the truth of their social experience before a hostile audience. Following Foucault, I would contend that we can interpret these extra-communicative agents of problematization as educators of a certain sort, intervening into democratic discourse to foster new modes of understanding amongst the public, but it is important to delineate carefully the deep differences that distinguish the confrontational work of the democratic parrhesiast from the pedagogical guidance of the traditional teacher.<sup>387</sup>

The democratic parrhesiast, as described in Foucault’s study, is quite simply the citizen who summons the courage to present before the public, either in word or deed, a truth that threatens to draw the anger of the people and place his life or public standing in danger. For ancient Athenian theorists, the role of the parrhesiast was often portrayed as one of the essential elements of a

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<sup>387</sup> Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College De France, 1982-1983*, 51–57.



democratic *polis*, alongside conditions of civic equality and rational discourse, for without the civic courage of the citizenry to publicize unpopular perspectives, the democratic mechanisms of deliberation and decision-making are blind to the public's false prejudices or dangerous assumptions.<sup>388</sup> The public sphere of democratic discourse, it turns out, has always been haunted by the forms of occlusion highlighted by Fraser, Allen, and Butler, and ancient Athenian thinkers were just as concerned with the often stubborn blindness of the public as modern day critical theorists are. The *hoi polloi* then, as well as now, were keen to have their assumptions and desires confirmed in the public sphere, and those demagogues willing to play to their audience's prejudices reliably met with greater success than those speakers willing to risk their lives by questioning the public's predilections.<sup>389</sup> And yet it was this latter category of *parrhesiastes* that could warn the *polis* when its pride had outgrown its power, when its desires had outstripped its resources, or when the adoration of its leaders had exceeded their true value to the city. Without the *parrhesiastes*, the public perpetually runs the danger of ignoring emergent problems and turning a blind eye to the forces that imperil its continued existence, and it is the educational task of the courageous parrhesiast to frankly and forcefully reveal to the members of the *polis* the occlusions of their worldviews, risking their standing in the public to pry open the scope of democratic deliberation.

This form of confrontational, parrhesiastic education in the public sphere, however, can be sharply distinguished from the conventional pedagogical relationship found in the institutional school along at least three different dimensions. First, in terms of the institutional setting, the parrhesiast presents his 'lessons' outside of any rigidly institutionalized context of hierarchical power relationships. The democratic parrhesiast confronts individuals as fellow citizens, meeting them in the public sphere under conditions of civic equality (*isegoria*) in order to offer his perspective on the problems that they share as members of a common *polis*. The audience of the parrhesiast's frank speech, unlike the students before

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<sup>388</sup> Foucault cites Polybius, *Histories*, 337.

<sup>389</sup> Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College De France, 1982-1983*, 183.

their teacher, are under no pressure to accept the conclusions promoted by the speaker, for the speaker addresses his audience within a sphere of legally guaranteed civic equality.<sup>390</sup> Second, although there are no institutional hierarchies governing the parrhesiastic relationship, there are nonetheless informal relations of power that traverse and organize the encounter; however, these power dynamics are precisely the converse of the usual educational interaction, for the parrhesiast actively subordinates himself to his audience and places himself at their mercy. When a civil rights protester risks arrest and imprisonment to make racial injustice visible, when a queer individual risks public mockery or ostracism to make alternative modes of desire and gender identity public, or when Socrates risks death to goad Athens to self-reflection, the audience for these parrhesiastic acts is under no pressure to accept the truth of the declaration put before them, for the parrhesiast has staked his public standing—or even his life—in order to win over the minds of his audience rather than demanding acclamation of his views. In the classroom, all risk lies on the side of the students, who choose to venture heterodox opinions under the cloud of the teacher’s evaluative power, but in the parrhesiastic encounter, it is the teacher who accepts all risk upon his shoulders.<sup>391</sup> Thirdly, there is also a difference in the mode of persuasion adopted by the parrhesiast. The parrhesiast obviously cannot rely upon any institutional standing to compel acceptance of his views, but neither does he depend solely upon the ‘forceless force’ of reason and the better argument, as would occur in a rational exchange of arguments between equals. Because the parrhesiast wishes to present a view that has been occluded from rational discourse and that his audience is averse to accepting, he must establish the truth of his views through alternative mechanisms; most notably, he attempts to establish the truth of his views *morally* through a courageous presentation of his subjective position. By subordinating himself to the judgment of his audience, and by risking his reputation and standing to present his position, the parrhesiast indicates that the claim he wishes to put before the public is utterly bound to his character and subjectivity. The *authenticity* of the

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 150–151.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 56.

parrhesiast's enunciation is guaranteed by the risk to which he courageously exposes himself.<sup>392</sup>

Each of these three distinctions contributes to a more satisfactorily democratic resolution to the problem of recalcitrant identity attachments than would be possible through standard educational practices. Unlike the critical pedagogue, who prompts critical recognition of problematic identity attachments in his students through the subtle exercise of pedagogical influence, contradictorily using his status as classroom guide to lead students towards emancipation from heteronomy, the parrhesiast instead constructs an extra-communicative intervention into the public sphere to encourage radical self-reflection. By working outside of the institutional context of the school first of all, the parrhesiast shifts the arena of education to the discourse among equals in the democratic public sphere; by surrendering himself entirely to the authority of public judgment, the parrhesiast renounces any pretension to epistemological superiority and bypasses the anti-democratic danger of pedagogical manipulation; and by staking the truth of his claims to the moral authenticity of his testimony, the parrhesiast encourages his audience to consider perspectives and arguments hitherto excluded as irrational or abnormal. The quasi-educational practice of parrhesia, through these extra-communicative techniques, opens up avenues for democratic citizens to problematize those identity attachments and deeply ingrained habits of thought that resist criticism through regular channels of democratic communication, and it achieves this extra-communicative enlargement of discourse without recourse to compulsion, indoctrination, or manipulation.

Nevertheless, the superiority of parrhesiastic practice for prompting radical self-reflection does not obviate the valuable work of communicative capacitation that is still possible within the walls of the school. Indeed, there are powerful bonds of interdependence between democratic parrhesia and communicative problematization that would suggest that parrhesia is effective only in the context of an already communicative democratic public. The parrhesiast lays his reputation on the line, after all, to

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 64.

highlight a problem that has emerged within his social experience, but which the general public has neglected to consider through its discursive deliberations; the goal of parrhesia is to bring a new concern onto the democratic agenda, to introduce new values into public currency, or to cast light on the perverse consequences of beliefs already in circulation. In short, parrhesia functions as a necessary supplement to the everyday work of communicative democracy, working at the margins of social experience, providing an “analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”<sup>393</sup>

Communicative education provides students with a basic toolkit for engaging in democratic life, securing for them first of all a lifeworld background of norms, values, and motivations, as well as the discursive capacities to criticize their social experience, to publicize problems, and to recognize shared concerns in the democratic claims made by others. Although an education in communicative capacities may not cut straight to the foundation of each individual’s identities, compelling students to reconsider their consumerist lifestyle, to experiment with new gender roles, or to abandon narrowly ethnic enclaves, a communicative education ensures that each individual is prepared to enter a lifetime of democratic discourse where such matters can be debated indefinitely among equals. Admittedly, the unexamined identity attachments that slip through the cracks of communicative preparation, depositing themselves below the surface of critical reflection, can provoke occlusions in the sphere of public discourse, but these occlusions cannot be remedied through the pedagogical agency of the school. Instead, we can only push back the horizon of communication, expanding the scope of the democratic contest, through the novel exercise of extra-communicative modes of political problematization. The school can prepare young citizens to present their political claims communicatively before the public and to reflect upon the claims of others, but if our democratic aspirations stretch beyond this limited task, we must rally our own courage and lay our radical concerns before the public rather than hiding

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<sup>393</sup> Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 319.

once again behind the imperfect panacea of the school.

## Conclusion

### Modest Hopes for Democratic Education

The school, as I noted at the outset of this inquiry, is one of the most ubiquitous and unavoidable institutions of modern social life—certainly more universal in its reach than prisons, hospitals, and other institutions of the social welfare state, and arguably more influential in its impact than churches, temples, or other traditional centers of character and community formation. Most all inhabitants of modern democratic states pass through the halls of a school during the formative years of their lives, and most will send their children down those same halls to have the experience repeated again for a new generation. And yet, despite the school's pervasive influence, it is nevertheless a fundamentally *problematic* institution, unclear in its mission and apparently dissatisfactory in its results. The school is at once overburdened by an unmanageable panoply of contradictory expectations placed upon it by parties at variance and simultaneously beleaguered by vociferous complaints concerning the many unpardonable sins it commits in the service of those expectations. If one party clamors for a set of changes that represent the only possible path to redemption for the school, another group, it can be guaranteed, will perceive those proposed change as representative of precisely the problems that threaten the education of youth today.

This dissertation has attempted to enter into the fray of such educational disagreement in search of a set of principles that can be used, if not to resolve the controversies surrounding the school and set forth a singular agenda for reform, at least to clarify some unifying goals by which the ongoing debates surrounding the school can be conducted more profitably. Unlike classical philosophical theories of

education, which begin with a foundational theory of the just soul or the blessed community and engineer innovative educational schemes to realize those theories in practice, I have adopted the anti-foundationalist strategy of beginning instead with the present fact of educational disagreement, weighing critically the claims made by committed partisans in order to reconstruct an approach to education that is accordingly more responsive to the needs of the present. The practical origins of the school, after all, lie not in the idealizations of philosophical theory, but in the tangled controversies and heated struggles through which developing societies attempted to cope with newly emergent social problems brought on by cultural pluralization and economic modernization. The school has historically developed as a flexible institution perpetually redesigned to confront the pressing difficulties of the day, and I have taken the complaints and dissatisfactions of the present moment as signs of the unmet needs and the occluded problems which the school might be reconstructed to serve today.

This anti-foundational inquiry into the tangled problematic of the school has highlighted in particular the tensions that persist between, on the one hand, the continual economization of the school curriculum and bureaucratization of school structure since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, on the other, the prominent hopes for cultural and political development placed upon the school by parties dissatisfied with the educational status quo. Historically, three broad deployments of the school have determined the course of American education: a communalist deployment, which understands the institution as a mechanism for consolidating parochial culture and familial relations; a political republican deployment, which seeks national consolidation and civic unity; and a medico-economic deployment, which perceives the institution of the school as a tool for augmenting the productive capacities and strength of the population. Although the early history of the school witnessed a pronounced struggle between these three visions of the social impact of the school, since at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economic deployment of the school has dominated the course of the institution, effacing robust ethical relationships from the classroom and replacing diverse cultural modes of socialization with increasingly

uniform acts of economic inculcation. While the economic deployment of the school has perhaps arguably served to better equip some individuals to cope with the vagaries of the modern capitalist economy, it has also inarguably produced a voluble population of discontents who lament the rootlessness, anomie, and political apathy that accompany the ethically meager curriculum offered by the school. It is upon this ethico-political deficit within the contemporary school that I believe efforts at reconstruction must focus today.

From within the din of contemporary debate, there thus emerges a clear, orienting complaint against the de-socializing and de-politicizing influence of the bureaucratically administered school and a discernible call for combating its singularly economic values. Despite the widespread basis of this educational discontent, however, trouble in formulating unified efforts at reform has arisen from the internecine conflicts over whether community or polity ought to take the lead in reconstructing the school. While communalists have called for a return to the traditional educational agencies of the family and the culturally unified community as a means to restore direction and value to the lives of the rising generation, liberal-democratic critics have argued that the regressive force of some traditional cultures would only save the school from a narrow-minded economism at the cost of embracing a narrow-minded cultural parochialism. A cursory reading of these struggles would seem to indicate that the revitalization of the school can either be founded upon the historically rooted resources of cultural communities or upon the secular values of a cooperative liberal-democratic polity, but neither blueprint for reform can accommodate the designs of the other.

Rather than digging the battle lines within critical educational theory more deeply, delving into psychological or sociological theory to justify one particular interpretation of individual or social development, however, I have attempted to listen to the claims of these too-often opposed sides in order to map out new grounds of commonality upon which both communalists and liberals can situate their educational projects. The gridlocked struggle within educational theory, I believe, can be



overcome only if we recognize that in back of the specific conceptions of ideal social life that motivate these different parties—the ideal of the culturally sacrosanct community, for example, or of the cosmopolitan community of autonomous individuals—there resides a common political commitment to using public acts of communication to publicize and to cope collectively with the emergent problems of pluralist society. This is a specifically *democratic* commitment that has deep pragmatic roots in the experience of modern life. Experiences of economic industrialization, cultural pluralism, and social hybridity give rise to numerous problems that extend far beyond the capacity of any one community or individual to cope with them, and because these problems increasingly come to dominate modern social experience, we are driven to participate in the forum of the democratic public, however imperfect and limited its present constitution, in order to air grievances and seek out paths of resolution.

The democratic commitment that resides behind and beneath the current of so many contemporary political struggles accordingly provides a new foundation for reconstructing the problematic institution of the school, for insofar as we depend upon the forum of the public to respond to the dissatisfactions of our present social experience, we must ensure that the problem-solving mechanisms of democracy, essential to the success of all forms of modern life, persist into the future. Based on this pragmatic interpretation of democratic political needs, it becomes clear that the school ought to be restructured around the goal of promoting the capacities and dispositions of *problematization*: the capacity to recognize problems in social experience and to inquire into their sources, along with the disposition to publicize those problems and to listen to the claims of others for domains of overlapping concern. While other deliberative democratic theories of education continue to emphasize the need for inculcating specific normative doctrines in the rising generation of active citizens, this theory of communicative problematization turns our pedagogical attention towards nurturing the diverse pragmatic motivations that incline individuals towards increased democratic participation and active problematization. The unifying ground of educational reform, in short, is the mission to augment the

responsiveness, resiliency, and efficacy of the democratic public, making it more astutely sensitive to exigent problems as they emerge in the far corners of social experience and making it more creative and dynamic in its response to those problems.

Although this initial commission for democratic education is decidedly thin in its normative content and ambiguous in its potential applications, is nevertheless broad and embracing in its capacity to accommodate and play host to the multiple cultural, moral, economic, and political demands that are placed upon the school today. Indeed, the theory of democratic politics as an activity of communicative problematization practically demands that educational institutions give ample room for the overlapping authorities of culture, religion, political belief, and ethical community to partake in shaping the outlook of the rising generation of citizens. Such collective resources of normative orientation are positively essential for the problematizing work of the democratic public because they provide individual citizens with both the evaluative perspective that places emergent problems in relief against the background of the status quo of social experience as well as with the motivational energy that encourages them to publicize those problems to a broader audience. Without the plurality and variety of value orientations provided by diverse forms of ethical socialization, the democratic citizenry runs the risk of succumbing to a purely administrative management of social life, which elevates the economic goals of productivity or efficiency to above all other valuable social pursuits. If the democratic system cuts itself off from the diverse ethical and critical resources that are nurtured within its plural communities of value, to that extent it denies itself the capacity to notice and respond effectively to emergent problems within social experience or to posit new goals for individual or collective pursuit.

The present achievement- and standards-orientation of the school focuses educational efforts upon a narrowly economic understanding of individual development and social growth, often grounded in the false belief that such a curriculum is the only objectively neutral educational goal that a diverse democratic society can agree upon. The economic deployment of the school, however, sparks such

elevated degrees of dissatisfaction that the myth of educational neutrality can no longer be maintained; educational theorists must pay attention to the problematizing claims of dissenters who publicize the non-neutral and destructive force of the economic model upon alternative modes of individual development. The economic deployment, in short, must give way to the forceful demands for deeper cultural socialization and more robust political preparation that have begun to surround the school.

The democratic model of education for communicative problematization that I have elucidated in the foregoing inquiry fosters a modest hope for one possible strategy to peel back the layers of economic control and pay heed to the alternative educational values of communities of dissent. It is not the productive population that ought to serve as the unifying and coordinating goal of all educational institutions; rather, it is the ideal of an active democratic public, capable of listening to the grievances of its constituent communities and responding swiftly and fairly to emergent problems. This democratic educational model allows room for diverse paths of development and socialization to thrive within it, but it still insists upon the need to unify the public to cope with the shared problems of collective social experience. Democratic education is thus grounded upon a simple unifying commitment: we as members of a democratic society collectively share in the problems and the rewards of contemporary social experience, and we accordingly have a profound interest, if not a duty, to inculcate in the rising generation of citizens the political abilities of self-governance that allow the public to better respond to the problems of the present. Under the auspices of this pragmatically democratic warrant, the school must be reconstructed to produce a more actively problematizing public.

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