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## ***Education and Democracy***

Education and democracy are inextricably linked in American social thought and practice. Democracy, in all of its historic and contemporary forms, has played a pivotal role in shaping conceptions of public education. How public education is imagined, scripted, and enacted is contested along philosophic, programmatic, and pedagogic dimensions in relation to competing conceptions of democracy.

Classic contributors to modern political thought and commentary, as well as those who framed modern arguments, have dealt specifically with the educational necessities of establishing and maintaining a democratic polity. They have generally reflected on the tensions between the socialization of a democratic nation's *subjects* (i.e. as acculturated, law abiding members) and the education of its *citizens* (i.e. critically thinking, active participants). Both education and democracy in the United States have evolved in response to historic geographic-based concerns (persistent regionalism, westward expansion, rapid urbanization, and globalization), significant demographic shifts (especially the cultural diversity brought by immigration), and economic growth (mostly the imperatives of industrial technologies). Capitalism in all of its historic forms (e.g. pre-industrial, industrial, post-industrial, globalization) and through its dominant technologies (e.g. mechanized agriculture, mass commodity production, transportation, and global information networks) sets limits (e.g. what's acceptable for critical analysis in curricula), provides objectives (e.g. agile job-readiness, rational consumer skills), and shape policy and practice (e.g. corporate bureaucratic form, economic incentives, market-based curriculum, emphases on individual choice) in public education.

## The Complex Interplay of Education and Democracy

Along with the cultural, social, and economic factors shaping contemporary public education, specific goals and their programmatic implications are intertwined in three partially overlapping forms of American democracy: **Institutional Republicanism**, **Popular Democracy**, and **Deep Democracy**. Each embodies general American cultural values (e.g. liberty, equality, and justice; free expression and tolerance for competing ideas; the rule of law). All three democratic forms support specific institutional arrangements (e.g. power sharing among legislative, executive, and judicial branches; free and frequent elections; majority rule with minority rights). All three promote universal education as necessary for effective citizenship. There are, however, important differences for both democracy and education in each form.

**Institutional Republicanism** understands the Constitution as establishing a republic with a limited representative government. Public education is understood as necessary to support government-centered institutions. The focus is on preparing citizens for orderly civic participation centered on obeying the law and voting in national, state, and local elections. Public education's role is primarily one of promoting *social stability* to ensure political continuity and economic growth. Young people are to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for informed and responsible consumption of material goods (economic productivity) and non-material civic benefits (individual rights).

**Popular Democracy** emphasizes broad and active involvement in civic life that goes beyond dutiful voting in periodic elections. Public education is needed to ground young citizens in democratic values (especially equality and social justice) and to inform

them about central institutional structures and processes. But education must also include critical analysis of contemporary ideas, conditions, and events. Interwoven with instructional efforts to shape social stability are programs designed to promote *social mobility* to overcome persistent structural barriers to status and opportunity. Young people are prepared to move through critical awareness toward principled action.

**Deep Democracy** advocates full participation in all aspects of social and civic life---not only those conventionally identified as ‘political. Beyond the teaching of core democratic values and dominant institutional arrangements, public education is to provide direct experience with practices of collective civic engagement. Young citizens are to enact complex processes of teaching/learning that lead to deliberative competence, social imagination, and inclusive participation in *social transformation*.

### **The Challenges of Civic Education**

All three democratic forms and their public education priorities have coexisted and often competed with each other throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. In different contexts, places, and times, one or another version of democracy and education have seemed predominant. While they are in competition over recognition and resources, each form generates internal conflict.

Most government officials and business interests understandably favor public education that legitimates their roles and therefore advocate the values emphasized in **Institutional Republicanism**. This understanding of democracy supports civic education that promotes the traditional values of patriotism, social unity, and economic growth; that provides extensive institutional descriptions; and that champions individual responsibility. Tensions within this mix of education and governance include conflict

over state and local control vs. national policies and standards, and public school adequacy vs. privatization.

Advocates of **Popular Democracy** criticize persistent and growing social, economic, and political inequalities and point to a politically disengaged and often cynical citizenry. A government largely ineffective in reducing social and economic inequalities is insufficient for a vibrant democracy. Civic education must include responsible critique, engagement with perennial problems, strategic understanding of institutional processes, and learning experiences that promote civic action. Tensions within this approach include trenchant, often dismissive, social criticism vs. attempts to broaden understanding and build coalitions. Progressive paradoxes also involve advocacy for more inclusive forms of action vs. continuing reliance on small elites and special interest group politics.

**Deep Democracy** and its educational imperatives have yet to be widely established and sustained. Despite enduring and often valiant efforts, there have been few instances of profound and integrative restructuring of public education and democratic governance. Confronted with fundamentally non-democratic social structures such as entrenched bureaucracies, persistent status hierarchies, dominant religious organizations, and even traditional family structures, civic education for Deep Democracy faces formidable resistance. Given aspirations for full and inclusive participation across all aspects of social life, civic educators must address tensions between the instructional requirements of individual vs. social learning along with recognition of private achievement vs. collaborative accomplishment.

## **Public Education for Deep Democracy**

Democracy, in all of its forms, is a continuing project. The development of its necessary elements, including public education, is uneven. Competitive individualism as the exclusive method for achievement in learning and life restricts both instructional and civic practice. The dominant result has been a shallow American democracy with voter indifference, elite-dominated public discourse, and growing citizen disengagement. With some situational differences, shallow democracy reinforces voters as passive consumers of candidates, parties, and policies that are advanced in ways indistinguishable from those used in the retail marketplace. Public education that emphasizes market-centered learning results in low intensity citizenship with personal civic responsibilities that can be discharged by preferred ignorance, fragmentary complaints, and episodic votes.

Drawing from and moving beyond the well-intended efforts associated with Institutional Republicanism and Popular Democracy are real prospects for Deep Democracy. A deep democracy is *radically social*, *persistently exploratory*, and *compellingly aesthetic*. These distinguishing criteria are recognizable in many versions of the good society. There are long-standing aspirations for a social order that supports the establishment of justice, the pursuit of truth, and the experience of beauty.

A deep democracy is radically social when it is broadly inclusive and authentically collaborative. Politics and education, at all levels and in all venues, involve dominant elites and a limited set of special interest groups. Reliance on these established patterns supports isolation, drives alienation, structures a narrowed discourse, and solidifies established forms of opposition in schools and society.

Developing a deeper set of democratic processes would expand the number of active participants across their life span and at all stages of social inquiry, decision-making, and implementation. Such movement requires broad engagement of school age youth, adult citizens, and disadvantaged groups to support border crossings between disparate positions and expectations. In finding such pathways, difficult encounters and negotiations will occur. These are necessary to engage and possibly integrate what may appear to be sharply conflicting goals, values, and behavioral styles.

This challenge is approachable when democratic processes are persistently exploratory. Shallow democracy offers a sense of certainty with minimal effort by students and adult citizens. Yet the realities of constant change flowing from the dynamics of our experienced world, signal pervasive uncertainty. Deep democracy requires persistent collaboration in teaching/learning to maintain openness, support principled risk-taking, and yield adaptive response. Deep social inquiry requires creativity over caution, vision over constraint, and deliberation over the convenience of closure. It is difficult, but necessary, to encourage and sustain conceptual divergence and multiplicity in adapting both to the turbulent and to the subtle changes in our multi-leveled lives. In education for deep democracy, there are no easy answers.

Deep democracy is *compellingly aesthetic* as it engages the emotions and energies necessary to persevere through the challenges of change. Intuition and inspiration, prophecy and poetry, enchantment and emotion, mystery and movement, silence and spirit are concepts seldom associated with problem-solving in education, politics, or governance. Teaching, learning, and decision-making for public purposes require much more than objective analysis and linear problem solving. Inseparable, rather than distinct from highly individualized cognitive processes, are human capacities for social empathy and intuition. Emotions shape our thinking,

often focusing attention, sometimes exerting decisive influence. Empathy, a feeling-based capacity, makes it possible to establish meaningful connections. Its continuing development allows us to sustain collaborative relationships not only with like-minded others, but even more importantly, with those whose experiences and commitments are quite different from our own.

Fulfillment of Deep Democracy's transformative purpose requires continuing innovation in civic education. Civic education must emphasize pedagogies that support movement beyond illusions of certainty, convenience, convergence, and control. Civic education for a deeper democracy must engage diversely valid meanings, perspectives, possibilities, and plans. Such pedagogies must:

- (a) extend collective wisdom concerning significant social issues;
- (b) expand possibilities for thought and action beyond those initially brought by individuals;
- (c) enrich relationships by increasing the number and variety of meaningful connections among diverse participants; and
- (d) enhance capacities for continued engagement in civic learning and public life that narrow the gap between democratic aspirations and real-world accomplishments.

Deep Democracy is a dynamic, multifaceted social composition. It can be shaped to create sites for the expression of strategic intuition, imaginative policy, and artistic advocacy. A more inclusive, more widely exploratory, and more aesthetically informed public education broadens opportunities for richer experiences of democratic life.

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### **Further Readings**

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