Toward Critical Citizenship: A Study of Citizenship, Legitimacy, and Civic Education

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This paper examines the link between civic education and governmental legitimacy from a philosophical perspective. Specifically, it questions how present educational methodology fosters the critical thinking skills necessary for citizens to legitimize their government by meaningfully participating in their political communities. The paper first determines that the present instructional methodology appropriated by the American public education system inadequately inculcates students with the value of critical thinking. The paper proceeds with parallel critiques of critical pedagogy and deliberative democratic theory, ultimately advancing a notion of “critical citizenship” that borrows from both aforementioned theories. By synthesizing these theories, the paper argues that the education system can foster a form of citizenship that emerges from students through a process of self-understanding as situated free agents within a political community. Such citizens can confer a genuine sense of legitimacy unto their government.

Since Plato wrote The Republic, civic education has been posited as a junction between political theory and praxis. Civic education courses have traditionally served two key functions within a polity: to inculcate students with the values and norms of their political community as well as to introduce them to basic procedural and institutional features of government. Though civics courses are not the only places where individuals come into contact with politics, they do provide important spaces in which individuals form the foundational knowledge upon which they build a political philosophy. As such, one comes to understand that the lessons individuals learn in their civics courses seek to transform them into engaged citizens of their particular polity.

The relationship between civic education and citizenship formation, between education and identity, is worth exploring from a philosophical perspective for a number of reasons. For instance, the philosophical, pedagogical, and political orientations of civic education curricula inform the individual’s conception of what it is to be an “ideal” citizen. Similarly, students can construe the views they encounter in these courses as political “common sense” and consequently adopt those views with a less critical understanding than those presented in other forums. This is crucial when one considers how such a citizen can confer a robust sense of legitimacy unto her or his government. In short, citizens’ early attitudes about their relationships to their government, their roles within their political communities and their political identities are largely produced by civic education. As Henry Giroux (2005, 153) reminds us: “[e]ducation is the terrain where consciousness is shaped, needs are constructed, and the capacity for self-reflection and social change is nurtured and produced.” Furthermore, though this paper is more concerned with formalized curricula within the education system, civic education also has a deeply experiential component that is fostered through one’s informal exposure to politics outside the controlled confines of the classroom.

No civic education curriculum is philosophically disinterested, nor should it try to be so. From the material presented in textbooks to the instructors who assign it, the components of civics courses are deeply informed by at least one or more, often conflicting, political philosophies. In a pluralistic democratic society, the same tensions between competing conceptions of political community are at work in civic education curricula. A democratic society would, presumably, strive to transform students into democratic citizens. But, what is a democratic citizen? Are democratic citizens produced, or do they emerge? On the one hand, from a normative perspective, civic education should provide a sense of continuity among citizens that makes everyone feel as though they belong to a community bound by shared experiences. On the other hand, particularly for democratic theory, civic education should stop short of indoctrinating students, as this would be counterintuitive to the ethos of democratic society. Rather, critical citizens should understand themselves as reasonably interdependent agents who share in a political community with other, similarly interdependent, agents.

As this paper will illustrate, liberal, communitarian and deliberative democratic theories all posit their own conceptions of what defines citizenship and how it should be formulated. I argue that each of these theoretical positions contains important elements of an enriching civic education curriculum, but that none of them offers a wholly satisfactory account of one. Namely, these orientations fail to adequately ground themselves in practical pedagogical application. Similarly, existing pedagogical discourses on civic education and citizenship formation frequently fail to consider the normative value of their practical prescriptions. Both
philosophical and pedagogical approaches could stand to deepen the insight they provide into the issue of how a citizen confers a robust sense of legitimacy unto her or his government. I will critique civic education in the United States to advance a notion of critical citizenship that is capable of conferring such legitimacy, as well as some indication for how it can be formulated.

This paper will begin with a review of the existing literature that provides the theoretical and practical background for my argument. The paper will then present a methods section in which key concepts will be defined. This section will also offer a brief account of the textbook content analysis framework used later in the paper to partly determine what is currently being taught in American civic education courses. I will then advance a critique of deliberative democratic theory to show how a conception of critical citizenship can develop within the existing educational environment through practical application of a more inclusive conception of so-called critical pedagogy. Finally, I will demonstrate how a critical citizen is capable of conferring a robust sense of legitimacy unto her or his government.

Review of the Literature

The existing body of literature on civic education typically presents itself as a history of education rather than as a philosophical account of its foundation. Few volumes explicitly engage the notion of citizenship in political community or identity more generally. Rather, they provide an insufficient, albeit helpful, historical perspective that outlines the development of social studies curricula in Western democracies. However, an accurate philosophical treatment of civic education must expand beyond the particular in house debates between pedagogues by including some discussion of salient political philosophical issues like individual identity and political community. Though these issues will not necessarily feature as the center pieces of my argument, they do provide a theoretical backdrop for later discussion.

Many writers who focus on citizenship and civic education begin their arguments with abstract conceptions of social order. For instance, advocates for civic education as a means of social change, such as William Stanley (2000), Susan Nolfke (2000), David F. Labaree (2000) and Paulo Freire (2003), tend to argue that public schools can function as free spaces for discourse among students as equals. Subsequent debates over topics as varied as “virtuous” versus “vocational” curricula and the instructor’s role within this space depict the student as a veritable tabula rasa. To counter this perspective, critical pedagogy advocates for “democratizing” classrooms, like Freire (2003) and bell hooks (1994), explore the variety of ways individuals learn and form identities. The theoretical understanding here is that students sitting in classrooms are not simply students alone. Rather, as identity theorists like Tamir (1993), Schrag (1997) and Brubaker (1996) would all argue, an individual who is a student in the morning might also be a soccer player in the afternoon and a family member in the evening.

This argument raised an early crucial point in the development of a philosophical treatment of civic education. Disagreement between liberal and communitarian conceptions of the individual and how that individual relates to her or his community manifests itself throughout much of contemporary political philosophy and education. Though several theorists have interestingly argued that this division presents a false dichotomy (e.g. Simhony and Weinstein 2001, Freedman and others, etc.), its prevalence in educational debate makes it one worth knowing. On the one hand, liberals argue that individuals have the ability to choose their associations. As Tamir (1993, 21) notes, “the ability to choose is the most essential characteristic of the human agent, and in fact, the only one that is beyond the limits of human choice, as choosing not to choose entails a choice.” On the other hand, Sandel (1996, 322) and other communitarians would argue that this liberal conception “cannot account for a wide range of moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, such as obligations of loyalty or solidarity.” They contend that the liberal view of the individual is too atomistic and that because one is born into a community, one is born into a socio-cultural situation from which one cannot remove oneself. As “situated selves,” we depend upon our immediate communities to impart the collective “stories, memories and meanings” that are essential for us to have meaningful lives (Sandel 1996, 349).

It is important to note for the purposes of this paper that labels like liberal and communitarian are necessary but insufficient descriptors. Each of these “groups” varies in complexity and few writers consider themselves purists. However, citizenship theorists like Ronald Beiner (1995, 14) argue that “both liberal and communitarian theories pose threats to the idea of citizenship.” Beiner (1995) instead suggests a “republican” view of the individual
as an agent with the capacity to choose facets of her or his identity while remaining bound by some constraints from her or his community. Simhony and Weinstein (2001) similarly argue, albeit in different language, that “new liberalism” rediscovers the holistic or communal aspects of the liberal tradition. In the process, they reveal that communitarian “critiques” of liberalism actually pull their philosophical ammunition from liberalism itself. Rather than the atomized view of the “rugged individual” caricatured by liberal critics, new liberals like Vincent Andrews (2001) state that citizenship is an essentially liberal tenet inasmuch as it captures the tension between individual rights and civil responsibilities.

Deliberative democratic theory, also known as discourse theory, attempts to negotiate the polarity between liberals and communitarians. Deliberative proponents like Benhabib (1994, 1996), Mansbridge (1990, 1996) and Joshua Cohen (1996) all follow Habermas (1996, 2001) in arguing that “legitimacy in complex democratic societies must be thought to result from the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all matters of common concern” (Benhabib 1996, 68). Habermas (1996, 28-29) contends that “discourse theory brings a third idea into play” between liberal and communitarian views through its emphases on a “decentered society” and “public use of reason.” This paper will further develop the notion of deliberative theory later, but it is important to note here that deliberative theorists intentionally posit themselves between liberal and communitarian political philosophies. Their conception of the individual within society borrows from both views insofar as the individual is capable of both making independent decisions and maintaining respect for the intersubjective views held by others within her or his political community.

This tension between liberal, communitarian and deliberative conceptions of the individual in political life clearly manifests itself when discussing political education. David Hursh and Wayne Ross (2000) point out that civic education works as a meeting point for political theory and praxis. The debate over whether public school civics courses should socialize students into becoming nationalistic and skilled factory workers or “develop the social conditions and intelligence that enable citizens to make social ... decisions that support their own and the community’s welfare” has been central to American education (Hursh and Ross 2000, 3). Richard Knight and James Shaver (1986, 71) frame the debate less polemically between those who feel public school curricula should be focused on preparing students to become social scientists and those who feel it should fulfill “a more encompassing civil purpose.” In other words, should public schools restrict their aim to teaching students the basic mechanics of the political machine, or should they also inculcate deeper civic virtues in the process? In this sense, the debate can be conceived as one between Weber and Mill.

Like the debate between liberals and communitarians, conservative and progressive pedagogues not only disagree with each other’s prescriptions, but also with each other’s point of reference. Conservatives like Knight and Shaver (1986) view this as a question of feasibility. “In social studies,” they write, “the political-ethical approach has made few significant inroads to the textbooks that provide the basic source of instruction in civics and government” (Knight and Shaver 1986, 77). They explain progressives’ obstacles as essentially psychological: “[s]ome researchers have found that decision making by school-age teenagers does not reflect comprehension of basic concepts of law and government, and teenagers seem unable to form coherent political philosophies” (Knight and Shaver 1986, 77). Rather than engage in discursive attempts to discover a “common good” in the classroom, Knight and Shaver, among other conservatives, advance a utilitarian approach to political education. This approach centers on teaching students the basic institutional features of American government, such as governmental branches, voting rules and constitutional rights. However, it stops short of inculcating any holistic conception of the good.

The conservative approach to civic education is contested by two somewhat uneasy bedfellows. On one side, political virtue, or “common good” proponents like Cuban and Shipp (2000), Hansot (2000), and, in some of his work, Giroux (2000) contend that public schools were designed to inculcate nationalist and civic virtues to students throughout the course of their standard education. They draw a distinction between civics and social studies courses, further arguing that civics should be expanded to include the arts, music and cultural studies. This expanded form of civics education would, in their conception, form the centerpiece of public education. On the other side, conservatives draw harsh responses from critical pedagogues like Paulo Freire (2003), bell hooks (1994), David Hursh and Wayne Ross (2000) and William Stanley (2000). Unlike conservatives, critical pedagogues argue along with John Mill that an individual can only become a good citizen through learning how to
critique her or his government. They prescribe methods of “democratizing” the classroom by creating a space for students and teachers to actively and critically engage not only contemporary political issues, but also the underlying philosophical and theoretical factors that put such issues into motion. This method remains consistent with neo-Gramscian and deliberative democratic theorists who further exalt the benefits of critical discourse as necessary for an active citizenry. Critical pedagogues differ from “common good” theorists in their comparatively liberal position that students should form their own conceptions of the good, rather than simply ingest one from an instructor.

**Methods**

The issues that have generated the current debates over education and citizenship have been well documented. In what follows, I will provide brief outlines for the major concepts of my proceeding argument: critical citizenship and civic education. Understanding my definitions of these concepts is vital for the philosophical argument that will dominate the majority of this study. In addition to explicating these concepts, I will quickly overview my comparative content analysis of three popular U.S. civics textbooks. Though it is not the primary focus of this paper, this analysis provides an important foundation for the following argument. It is worth noting that this aspect of the paper is not wholly original in either impetus or conclusion. Indeed, many of my conclusions have been examined in greater detail in previous works by other critics. However, my methodological approach is somewhat new inasmuch as it seeks to operationalize key concepts and present the findings of my research in quantitative format in contrast to much of the existing, primarily qualitative, literature.

**Critical Citizenship**

To facilitate a philosophical account of civic education, I will work from a normative conception of citizenship. According to Callan (2004), this view of citizenship serves two complementary roles within a polity. First, citizenship “specifies the rights that properly belong to citizens and the conditions under which those rights are permissibly bestowed or denied” (Callan 2004, 75). Citizenship’s second role is “to prescribe the ideals and virtues that citizens should develop and the duties they must discharge in order to secure the justice and stability of the polity to which they belong” (Callan 2004, 76). In some respects, this view is consistent with Rawls’ (2001, 24) definition of the person as “someone who can take part in, or play a role in, social life, and hence who can exercise and respect its various rights and duties.” As such, it follows that this conception of citizenship also understands individuals as free and equal within political society and “willing] to settle the fundamental political matters in ways that others as free and equal can acknowledge are reasonable and rational” (Rawls 2001, 92).

A vital component of any conception of citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society is the capacity for and expression of critical thought. One should be able to engage in a deliberative, rather than adversarial, style of debate in which one joins fellow citizens in “exploring] a range of opinions on a common theme and, if possible, to consider how to reach a compromise of some sort” (Jerome and Algarra 2005, 497). Not only should one take interest in the issues that affect one’s community, but one should also understand how to form views that are consistent with one’s desires as they relate to the concerns of others within that community. The citizen should recognize other viewpoints and, importantly, maintain the capacity to change one’s mind based on the product of well reasoned collective argumentation.

By critical citizen, I mean an individual who recognizes her or his situation within a political community and who engages in the discourses that define both that situation and the parameters of her or his political community. This notion of citizenship is similar to the ideal participant in deliberative democratic theory. When placed in circumstances that are not conducive to participation, “citizenship is reduced to a client’s relationships to administrations that provide security, services, and benefits paternalistically” (Habermas 1996, 78). For Habermas (1996, 126), citizens “achieve autonomy only by both understanding themselves as, and acting as, authors of the rights they submit to as addressees.” Consequently, critical citizenship as a political end is only possible when, first, the right to participate in political discourse is legally guaranteed and, second, where individual citizens are equipped with the necessary means to actively and meaningfully participate. This second precondition is not accounted for in deliberative theories.

My view of critical citizenship is consistent with Freirean critical pedagogy inasmuch as it demands a level of critical literacy.
Critical literacy entails the “capacity to link history and personal biography, private problems and public issues” (Morrow and Torres 2002, 119). Further, the understanding that an individual possesses the capacity for this kind of understanding complements deliberative democratic theory. However, whereas both deliberative theorists and critical pedagogues focus their attention on marginalized members of society (e.g. the illiterate adult, the disenfranchised adolescent, etc.) my conception of critical citizenship is considerably more inclusive. In order to support a coherent political philosophy that articulates a robust sense of legitimacy, critical citizenship should be expanded to include all members of a polity. Rather than positing a conception of citizenship that is simply antagonistic toward hegemonic power centers, my view of critical citizenship rejects hegemony on every socio-economic level. To that end, both underprivileged and well-off members of society should be encouraged to develop a sense of critical citizenship.

Civic Education

Thus far, I have referred to the process by which an individual becomes a citizen as “civic education.” However, within the pedagogical discourse on the issue, many authors and theorists employ a variety of other terms to refer to related disciplines. It is worth drawing one’s attention to the distinctions between these terms, as scholars who take for granted that they are debating with one another on similar territory often become confused.

The most common term used for this type of curriculum within pedagogical discourse is “social studies.” Social studies is an umbrella term for the social sciences portion of a standard curriculum that includes geography, economics, political science and history. For my purposes, social studies refers too broadly and ambiguously to issues related to the social sciences without speaking directly to the process of citizenship formation. In an attempt to narrow the focus of this paper, I will abandon this common term for a more suitably exact nominal. I use civic education, or civics, throughout this paper because the terms most accurately correspond to my notion of the kind of citizenship such curricula should aim for. By emphasizing civic virtues, these curricula maintain their orientations toward developing political, rather than simply nationalistic, identities.

Textbook Analysis

American civics and history textbooks have attracted attention from educational and social critics alike. However, they have also been notably neglected by political philosophers. Such neglect is surprising given that, as Matthias von Hau (2005, 2) argues, textbooks “reveal state ideologies of national identity and history ... textbooks serve to diffuse these ideologies among the broader population.” This scholarly dearth must be filled in order to clarify our general perception about what is currently being taught in public schools on both a theoretical and practical level. More precisely, a thorough empirical analysis of textbook content would prove helpful for grounding both critical and sympathetic commentary on the quality of American textbooks.

Previous textbook analyses have been largely based on anecdotal evidence of their subjects’ intellectual impoverishment. While every author finds a few quotations that exemplify the particular point he or she is trying to advance, a systematic content analysis of K-12 civics books has not, to my knowledge, ever been conducted. Though such a study lies outside the scope of this essay, I have nevertheless conducted preliminary research into this field. My findings are reported below. While necessarily incomplete, the results of this analysis yield important clues as to the scope of the problem with textbooks.

What Are Students Learning?

Textbook Content Analysis

This study focuses on three widely distributed textbooks used in civic education courses: Our Nation (Macmillan/McGraw-Hill), American Anthem (Holt) and The American Nation (Pearson-Longman). These books were obtained for this analysis based on the size of the markets that approved them and not on critical reviews. In analyzing each individual book, I focused my search on three general components of each text. First, in order to determine the

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2Our Nation was adopted by Texas; The American Nation, despite poor reviews from the American Textbook Council (ATC), was adopted by California; and American Anthem was a Codie finalist for "Best New Product" in Texas.
organization of the text I divided the number of pages per chapter by the total number of pages featuring at least one chart, graph or diagram to obtain a ratio. Where applicable, I also considered the number of pages devoted to critical skills fostering. Second, in order to determine how the text related the individual to her or his community, I divided the number of pages referencing at least one of the following concepts: citizenship, democracy and ethnicity\(^3\) by the total number of pages in the substance of the text. \(^4\) Lastly, in order to determine the level of critical thinking, \(^5\) I weighed the number of “critical thinking” questions against the total number of questions in a text.

**Citizenship.** The concept of citizenship was generally neglected in every text studied. Though it accounted for 2.2 percent of *Our Nation*’s overall content, it was only mentioned three times in *American Anthem* and on only five pages, or one percent, of *American Nation*. The term was underdeveloped and stripped of any explicit political context beyond questions of legal status. Further, while *Our Nation* proposed to its younger audience that citizenship entailed a sense of duty or other commitment to one’s community, the texts prepared for older students failed to expand upon, let alone critique, this fairly simple operative definition. For example, the authors of *American Anthem* frequently substituted terms like asylum and amnesty as the “goal for ... immigrants,” whom the text further treated as a kind of problem group for cultural assimilation.

**Democracy.** *Our Nation* defined democracy as “a form of government in which the people make the laws and run the government” (Banks et al. 2003, R 79). Over the course of the entire book, only 22 pages (4.3%) were dedicated to any discussion of government. Of this discussion, 42 percent was procedural, 46 percent was historical, and only 12 percent was normative. For its part, *American Anthem* mentioned democracy only five times, and

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\(^3\)“Ethnicity” was assessed in two ways: the number of times the literal term appeared in the index of a text and in its disaggregated form (Native American, African American, European Immigrant, and Latino/Hispanic American).

\(^4\)“Substance of the text” refers to the total number of pages that feature content rather than assessment, excluding indexes, glossaries, reference sections (except for excerpted material in some texts), tables of contents and atlases.

\(^5\)Unlike some authors, I define “critical thinking” material as that which fosters opinion formation, deliberation, substantive discussion (eliciting more than two sentences from the student) and requires the student to demonstrate mastery of the material by responding with viewpoints that link contextual material either thematically or relationally and seek to do more than merely persuade the reader.

even then failed to define or contextualize the term. Given that seven percent of the content material directly addressed government, one could apologetically read this odd omission as an indication that the authors took it for granted that students would have a working comprehension of democracy by this point in their educational career. *American Nation*, too, failed to define democracy, invoking the term six times within the text. By contrast, communism was mentioned 17 times. Given the disparity between frequencies, one could conclude that a student reading this book would sadly come away from her or his civics course with a more nuanced understanding of communism than democracy.

**Ethnicity.** Of the researched terms, ethnicity enjoyed the highest overall frequency. A full quarter of *Our Nation*’s content addressed ethnicity in the United States, while *American Anthem* and *American Nation* devoted 21.9 and 9.6 percent, respectively, of their content to the subject. Regrettably, greater frequency failed to translate into quality. The texts considered ethnicity in America through patronizing, reductive tones that tended to treat ethnic pluralism as an albatross to national harmony. This was particularly evident in their constructed narratives of the African American experience, which also dominated each text’s discussion of ethnicity. In *Our Nation*, 31 percent discussed slavery, 37 percent discussed overall violence, and only 15 percent discussed the group’s positive contribution to the United States. Similar patterns were noted in the other texts. Further, discussions of Native Americans were limited to pre-colonial histories of the North American continent, while Latinos were largely confined to “contemporary issues” sections toward the end of a given text.

**Critical Thinking.** Though every text in the study expounded the importance of critical thinking, very little of their content actually fostered such skills. Of the sections reserved for critical thinking in *Our Nation*, only 52 percent of the questions engaged students on a satisfactorily critical level. This might be excusable, given that *Our Nation* was written for a younger audience; however, *American Anthem* and *American Nation* fared no better. According to the authors of *American Anthem*, 121 pages, or 17 percent, of the text features at least one “critical thinking question.” However, according to the operational definition of critical thinking in this study, only 44 (36%) of these questions actually engage the student’s ability to think critically. *American Nation* designated critical thinking material as supplementary. In order to access the “supplementary”
material, a student would need both internet access and the $54 registration fee. Both of these requirements implicitly exclude students from lower-income families who may very well not be able to access the internet at home or for whom transportation to and from a public library would raise an unfair barrier to their access to important material.

**Teachers as Tools**

One could make the claim that if textbooks alone are inadequate teaching tools, it is the instructor’s responsibility to compensate. Indeed, as Giroux (2005, 154) radically charges, educators “need to take positions without standing still and make available those ideas, values and theories that can critically challenge official knowledge that indiscriminately embraces both religious fundamentalism and neoliberal ideology.” Critical pedagogues place the heavy responsibility on instructors to not only assure that students understand the material presented in textbooks, but also to foster critical thinking and discursive skills within the classroom that may have been absent from the pages of those books. As will be discussed later, instructors are charged with perhaps the most important role within critical pedagogy: teaching students to subvert hegemony. However, as this study has already made clear, this critical view of civic instruction is directly at odds with the information presented in their primary instructional tool. Moreover, it assumes a degree of consensus among the instructors themselves that this critical responsibility is an important one to take up in their own pedagogies.

In many respects, the inflammatory rhetoric appropriated by critical pedagogues like Giroux isolates their preaching to a very small choir. For all of the potential optimism in their revolutionary portraits of the instructor-as-instigator, these critical pedagogues crash up against potential cynicism when they consider the dispositions of the average American public school instructor. Rather than fiery social critics, field studies of actual relationships between instructors and students cast teachers in a more sedate, often dull, light. Carol Hahn (1999, 236) reports in her work that, “[a]lthough no teachers I interviewed said that they would avoid controversial issues, several said that in their particular community there were some, such as evolution, abortion, and race relations, that they would handle with particular care and sensitivity.” More often than not, Hahn observes, civics courses are dominated by teacher lectures that simply elaborate on material presented in the assigned reading from the approved textbook. She notes further, in “the USA the courses designed for citizenship preparation vary in the extent to which students engage in the investigation and discussion of controversial public policy issues” (Hahn 1999, 242). Given the standards-driven nature of civic education in the United States, this observation indicates that while some teachers attempt to engage students in critical discussion, others simply rely upon information presented in textbooks. Such variance further suggests that the level of critical engagement with students is more a reflection of the instructor’s individual disposition than a pedagogically informed approach, which would manifest itself more uniformly across curricula, as is the case in Denmark. That Hahn (1999, 241) concludes her comparative study between American and continental European schools by stating “[students] in ... the USA were less likely than students from the three continental European countries to say that they felt comfortable expressing their views when they disagreed with most of the other students” further indicates that American instructors are ill-equipped to foster genuinely democratic discursive skills in the classroom.

Catherine Combleth (1998) seconds Hahn’s observations of American civics instructors. Her research indicates that “although several teachers said that they wanted students to have access to more than one point of view, we did not observe many instances of active student engagement with diverse viewpoints” (Combleth 1998, 632). Further, in her interview with one instructor who was challenged by several students questioning the content of a government poster, the instructor “told the boys that there was no time for a debate and continued the review for the next day’s exam” (Combleth 1998, 632-633). This distaste for discussion in the classroom at the expense of review time suggests that not all teachers share Giroux’s view of the instructor as critical pedagogue. Rather, “the tendency of several teachers to speak for 'us,' particularly to use 'we' as if referring to all United States citizens and residents” indicates that most instructors implicitly support uniform ideologies through their classroom rhetoric (Combleth 1998, 633). Combleth (1998, 635) reports that some instructors even “presented an image of America as European, suggesting a limited sense of diversity.” This observation corroborates observations of textbooks as tools that reify the marginalization of minority ethnic groups by failing to address them. By failing to situate the conditions of marginalized
groups in either textbooks or instructor-facilitated classroom discussion, “the American curriculum observed in practice focuses on both the predominance of partial, unconnected images and the frequently conveyed sense that history just happened and things continued to happen as if by chance” (Carnell 1998, 641). Consequently, students are rarely introduced to any notion of agency or subsequent sense that critical thinking entails critical action.

Promoting Critical Citizens

As federal programs like No Child Left Behind pressure individual school districts to adopt increasingly standardized curricula, it is worth considering the ramifications for advancing a standardized conception of citizenship within a pluralistic political community. To what degree is a standardized normative conception of citizenship compatible with a pluralist democratic society? A normative conception of citizenship presupposes that everyone has the capacity for critical thought. Civic education curricula should work toward instilling in the student-citizen the means for developing that critical thought, as well as for expressing the ideas that it produces.

Critical Pedagogy

The critical pedagogy espoused by theorists like Freire (2003), hooks (1994, 2003) and Giroux (2005) presents a useful perspective for educational reform. Freire’s concept of “banking education,” for instance, posits a critique of education more generally that can be easily applied to American civic education. “Banking education” refers to the practice “in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” of the information “taught” in the course (Freire 2003, 72). For Freire (2003, 72), this process produces citizens who are themselves “filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.” Here, students are reduced to curriculum consumers who do not critically engage with their product. Concepts like citizenship, diversity and democracy are absent from civics curricula, students do not “bank” any understanding of them in even the simplest terms. By excluding these concepts, American civic education suffers from a literal “learning deficit” of the knowledge and skills necessary for informed citizenship.

Critical pedagogues also point out that the student’s disjointed relationship to knowledge is perpetuated by the spatial divide between student and instructor. If we accept Combleth’s (1998) observation of classroom organization as the norm, we understand that students are alienated from their instructor by a spatially and intellectually hierarchical arrangement. From the “front” of the class, the teacher, as sole possessor of knowledge, transmits information to her or his passive students, who in turn regurgitate that information on standardized tests or through recitation. As hooks (2003, 91) laments, “[t]eachers who care, who serve their students, are usually at odds with the environments wherein we teach.” In opposition to this arrangement, “Freire casts his argument in terms of a philosophy of praxis, reconstructed in terms of a subject-subject dialogue” between student and instructor (Morrow and Torres 2002, 111). In some ways, classroom organization is as important for this philosophy of praxis as is the instructor’s use of the Socratic Method. For instance, by simply arranging classroom desks in circles rather than rows, the teacher can spatially facilitate Freire’s (2003) mode of subject-subject discourse.

As a general rule, critical pedagogy works to establish the classroom as a democratic space. bell hooks (1994, 40) notes that working within a critical pedagogy encourages the instructor to transform the classroom from a vacuous space into a community “in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor.” “It has been my experience,” hooks (1994, 40) continues, “that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice.” Like many critical pedagogues, hooks aims to reclaim the classroom for marginalized voices, particularly for those who have been victims of de facto racial segregation. “As class mobility and a racist real estate market make predominantly white neighborhoods more common,” she observes, “schools are being built to meet the needs of these neighborhoods while inner-city schools or schools in small cities ... tend to be the ones that have ethic diversity” (hooks 2003, 67). Though hooks’ thoughts on real estate are beyond the purview of this paper, her questions about regionally-determined funding discrepancies between schools and school districts are important for this discussion. For instance, how can critical pedagogues insist that a teacher arrange her or his classroom desks in circles rather than rows when she or he is operating within a room that, though designed for 32 students, is forced to accommodate 47 due to overcrowding?
As noted, critical pedagogues also criticize the quality of textbook content. The preceding textbook analysis illustrates that American political history is largely dominated by white figures. When facilitated by such teaching tools, hooks (2003, 85) asserts that the classroom takes on the hegemonic qualities of “a microcosm of dominator culture.” Classroom discussions that are informed by the communicative tenets of critical pedagogy must, therefore, address systematic forms of oppression and social marginalization that are absent from the pages of textbooks. Along this vein, Giroux (2000, 154) contends:

Within the current historical context, struggles over power take on a symbolic and discursive as well as a material and institutional form. The struggle over education is about more than the struggle over meaning and identity; it is also about how meaning, knowledge and values are produced, legitimated, and operate within economic and structural relations of power.

It is impossible to engage in this struggle against hegemony if one does not command a certain set of critical thinking skills. In order for student-citizens to appreciate their socio-historical situation, as Sandel (1996) would implore them, they would have to critically analyze, question, and discuss their values, ideologies and lived experiences with others in their community. This discursive process fosters emotional dialogue both between members of a community, as well as between members of different communities. According to critical pedagogues, the democratic classroom is the most appropriate space in which to actualize such a dialogue.

**Deliberative Democratic Theory**

While it is important for the student-citizen to engage in dialogue within the classroom, one might wonder how the product of this dialogue can be politically actualized. I argue that the deliberative democratic model presents an appropriate theoretical platform for such actualization. Deliberative theory and critical pedagogy have a number of conceptual commonalities and concerns. However, deliberative theory differs from critical pedagogy in its explicit concerns for citizenship and political legitimacy. In their comparative analysis of Freire and Habermas, Raymond Morrow and

Carlos Torres (2002, 116) note:

[Both] Freire and Habermas give privileged positions to vulnerable social subjects as the frame of reference for questions about learning. In the case of Freire, the adult illiterate, the “popular” classes, and the dependent society provide the exemplars, whereas for Habermas it is the helpless child, the adolescent in motivational crisis, the working class, or in the case of the public sphere, the manipulated citizen. These different points of departure have implications for the focus of their respective concerns, though not the goal: the conditions of possibility of individual autonomy.

For Habermas (2001), democracy takes on educational significance through the individual’s participation in procedures that are designed to foster inclusion and understanding as they produce political and legal norms. But, Habermas (2001, 308) and other proponents of deliberative theory take this educational experience a step further as they advance the notion that democratic legitimacy for the entire social structure of a polity is contingent upon “the supply of informal public opinions that, ideally, develop in structures of an unsubverted political public sphere.” In short, deliberative theory can be read such that one’s entire lifeworld takes on the educational potential that critical pedagogues restrict to the classroom inasmuch as deliberation “is a procedure for being informed” (Benhabib 1994, 32).

Despite Habermas’ later revisions to his notion of free and equal public discourse, the majority of deliberative theory is premised on the notion that distinctly rational public discourse “among individuals considered as moral and political equals” (Benhabib 1994, 27) provides the procedural source of political legitimacy. As Benhabib (1994, 30-31) writes:

According to the deliberative model, legitimacy and rationality can be attained with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity if and only if the institutions of their interlocking relationship are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all ... results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal
individuals. The more collective decision-making processes approximate this model, the more the presumption of their legitimacy and rationality increases.

The ethical foundation of this premise is that every member of a polity must be both procedurally and, more problematically, intellectually equal. Importantly, as Benhabib (1994, 34) later remarks, “[d]emocratic procedures have to convince, even under conditions when one’s interests as an individual or as a group are negatively affected, that the conditions of mutual cooperation are still legitimate.”

The deliberative model’s insistence upon procedural inclusion is significantly undermined by the equal weight it affords to both rational discourse and the subordination of self-interest in legitimacy claims. The deliberative theory essentially posits a procedural model that attempts to straddle competing conceptions of the self in society as presented by liberal and communitarian theorists. On the one hand, the theory’s claim that everyone within a polity is capable of critical, rational thought is consistent with Rawls’ view of public reason to the extent that both models maintain that institutional justice and political legitimacy are derived from public processes. On the other hand, the decentralized, unrestricted view of the public sphere posited under the deliberative model transcends the conceptual, modal and spatial restrictions imposed by Rawls, thus lending itself to a more communitarian understanding of the self as, to some degree, situated within the norms of one’s community. In negotiating these internal tensions, deliberative theorists get jammed between a theoretical rock and a hard place: how can all citizens be simultaneously independent and interdependent? Further, how realistic is it to presume that citizens can put aside the moral and value systems of their lives—systems that deeply inform the way they perceive their situation even with critical reasoning processes—in the name of public rationality? Without a sufficient response to these questions, it seems that deliberative theory would inadvertently produce its own de facto segregation between those citizens who are deemed rational as well as normatively self-less and those who are not.

Synthesis of Critical Pedagogy and Deliberative Theory

Many feminist and institutionalist critics continue to discredit the deliberative model precisely because it could not, despite Benhabib’s best efforts, produce satisfactory answers to these questions. Young’s (1994) feminist charges that the model’s insistence upon exclusively rational discourse excludes many members of a polity from idealized dialogue are fair objections. Similarly, institutionalist skepticism toward the practical application of this theory is warranted inasmuch as deliberative theorists have had a difficult time resolving the issue of self-subordination and the potential for “tyranny of the majority” styles of democratic practice. However, I contend that a synthesis between critical pedagogy and deliberative democratic theory can lead itself to a joint-project that both fosters critical thinking as well as a more robust sense of legitimacy conflation.

As noted in the preceding discussion of commodiousness between Habermas (2001) and Freire (2003), critical pedagogy and deliberative democratic theory complement one another such that each is enriched by the other. Deliberative theory finds a natural ally in critical pedagogy to the extent that the latter grounds the former through praxis. This praxis includes a dialogical orientation that promotes emotional discourse even as it cultivates the reasoning skills one needs for active, rational participation in the deliberative model. Further, by providing student-citizens with the discursive “training-grounds” of the democratic classroom, critical pedagogues train students to think and speak as free individuals with a mind toward critically analyzing their social situation. In this sense, students are more likely to mature into the kinds of citizens who will be inclined toward the deliberative model of decentralized but productive discourse. Likewise, by borrowing from the political philosophical tenets of deliberative theorists, critical pedagogues are provided with a vital theoretical orientation that normatively politicizes their practice through citizenship. Citizenship, in every sense of the term, entails an essential degree of equality among individual members of a polity.

However, there remains one glaring interstice in this synthesis that presents ethical and practical problems for deliberative theorists and critical pedagogues alike. As noted earlier, both Habermas (2001) and Freire (2003) share concerns for marginalized members of a polity. Consequently, both theories focus on “including the other,” as Habermas might put it, to the exclusion of, ironically, the majority. If we are to ground our conception of critical citizenship in this synthesis, we must make both models more inclusive. For, as
Talbert and others have noted elsewhere, it is often the “best students,” those students who score well above national averages on standardized tests, who internalize hegemony most radically. If hegemony is oppressive in its universalizing narrative of shared experience and marginalizing in its exclusionary ideology, the struggle against it must be equally broad based. Importantly, one should not consider this “struggle” as a dialectic between “the people” of a marginalized group and the elite within society. As Dworkin (2006) has argued, legitimacy rests on a government’s willingness and capacity to provide the preconditions for equality among its citizens. The antagonistic relationship Freire (2003) calls for is antithetical to this notion of equality, inasmuch as it would surrender the elite to a fate of hegemonic internalization. Rather than this “fight fire with fire” ideological warfare, I contend that any coherent view of critical pedagogy or deliberative democratic theory—and certainly any synthesis between the two—must discourage “banking education” in both the inner-city public school and the elite private school.

The Ends of Civic Education: Robust Legitimacy

By equipping citizens with the critical capacity to reasonably critique policy decisions and to formulate alternatives, civic education opens up the possibility of endowing individuals with a more robust conception of their relationship to their government. Especially within a representative democracy, citizen skepticism no longer translates directly into the pessimistic paralysis Sandel and other communitarians lament; nor do individual citizens surrender their agency, their ability to choose their associations, to the tyrannous majority as many liberals fear. Moreover, though political opportunity structures may remain closed, the citizen may feel that there are more avenues for substantive participation in the democratic process. This civic activity is vital for the individual’s sense of validation as an equal within her or his community. Unlike the communitarian conception, however, she or he earns this validation through her or his exercise as a free-thinking agent who can critically choose to accept her or his association as a citizen within a polity. In this sense, citizenship emerges from within the student as a product of critical, reflective thought.

Civic education courses that work toward developing students’ critical capacity perform a normative function within the polity.

Papastephanou (2005, 514-15) contends that civic education “must enlarge its perspective by turning to the connection of the public sphere with the way in which pupils understand themselves and their positions in society.” As participants in civics courses that have been informed by critical pedagogy, students should develop into critical citizens who will reflect upon their condition and devise ways of improving it. This reflective exercise should then be applied to their community to challenge it and, in the process, enrich it. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of citizenship, in this sense, is to confer a robust sense of legitimacy unto one’s government. A “robust sense of legitimacy” entails a notion of political authority a citizen grants her or his government that is derived from the critical thinking process. The low number of domestic riots a government must put down is no more accurate a measure of its legitimacy than of the effectiveness of its propaganda. Indeed, a docile and apathetic citizen population is not capable of conferring legitimacy unto their government precisely because it does not give a moment’s thought to the ramifications of such a decision. Understood as such, the present civic education system in America does not produce citizens. Rather, it produces a legitimation crisis.

References


