

EDUCATION AS A PRECONDITION FOR DEMOCRACY

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SUMMARY

While the relationship between education and democracy is axiomatic, there are mediating factors which determine the type of education and the nature of democracy in operation. Since a specific conception of citizenship determines the form and content of education, as a facilitative process, education becomes a conditional precondition for democracy. An education mediated by different conceptions of citizenship is instrumental in promoting the hegemonic concepts and practices at a given time. This was evident in the pedagogy of the Soviet bloc and to a large extent in other forms of totalitarianism, such as in Germany and Italy and in apartheid in South Africa.

However, in its “pure” form, education has inherent properties which transcend ideologies. It gives the capacity and wisdom to access and process information, to select the relevant from the general and to promote a critical understanding which is fundamental to choice. Democracy is about freedom of choice, equity and justice and no process or practice other than education has the competence to promote these fundamental values.

Introduction

The relationship between education and democracy is axiomatic. From Plato’s philosopher rulers, to Aristotle and down to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, education has been accepted as a sound facilitator for participation in an informed decision making process. What has been in dispute, particularly since Karl Marx, is the type of education and the nature of democracy, the assumption being that democracy is informed by a specific conception of citizenship. What I want to argue for in this paper is that a specific conception of citizenship determines the form and content of education and that depending upon that content, education can either be a precondition for democracy or can be used as an instrument of maintaining power relations

which, in the end, might lead to an erosion of the basic freedoms of citizens.

Power and Powerlessness

John Gaventa recalls an incident where together with a community organiser they had climbed a narrow path to a mountain cabin to talk to a retired miner about joining with others in a lawsuit challenging the low taxation of the corporate coal property which surrounded the miner's home. After listening attentively to the account of the local injustices which Gaventa and other students had 'discovered' the miner showed no surprise, as he had known of the inequities since the land of his father had been expropriated by the coal lords.

Gaventa continues "I had read the theories of democracy, about how victims of injustice in an 'open system' are free to take action upon their concerns, about how conflicts emerge and are resolved through compromises among competing interests. Overlooking the valley from the miners' porch, what I saw seemed to question the lessons I had learnt." (Gaventa, J., 1980:V). Confronted with glaring powerlessness in the face of gross exploitation, Gaventa made this observation in the Appalachian Valley across parts of Kentucky and Tennessee in the United States, a country hailed as the world's leading democracy and this observation was made as recently as the 1970s. Similarly, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in South Africa, the leading democracy on the continent, traditional leaders are fighting the Demarcation Board which seeks to incorporate rural areas, adjacent to urban municipalities, in a system that will enable rural residents to access services and amenities in better resourced urban metropolises. Rural residents are 'surprisingly' silent in this battle for borders. In both instances, the deafening silence by the affected parties is telling. In the Appalachian Valley miners remained silent while the American Association Ltd, a British company, plundered their land. In South Africa rural inhabitants have maintained an apparent complacency while traditional leaders rape their rights and confine them to eternal subservience. Yet both

countries are modern democracies, each endowed with an elaborate constitution and a bill of rights. Why have such inequities leading to gross travesties of justice evoked neither protest nor comment from the victims given the heritage of democracy in both countries? Regarding inequalities and the absence of challenge to inequities in the Appalachian Valley Gaventa observes: “I began to read literature which challenged some of the more elitist democratic theories to which I had previously been exposed...In situations of inequality the political response of the deprived may be seen as a function of power relationships” (*Ibid*: VI). He continues: “Power works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless. Rebellion, as a corollary, may emerge as power relationships are altered. Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced and interests from being recognised.” (*Ibid*: VII). The South African case is recent and no academics have commented as yet; if they ever will do, it will be a historical rejoinder.

The thrust of this paper is on education as both an instrument and a leveller and therefore a precondition for the capacity to maintain or alter power relations in societies since it is only when there is a balance in the power relations that citizens can participate effectively in processes and decisions that affect their lives. The opposite holds as well. While the traditional pluralist approach to democracy focuses on participation in the decision making process, the central argument in this paper is that representative democracy as a widely practiced form of popular participation can degenerate easily into rule by the elite. This is essentially so where huge disparities in information exist. Education as both information and a tool for accessing information is, therefore, a fundamental prerequisite to the capacity to participate democratically in decisions that affect individuals and groups. Sigdi’s operationalisation of democracy as “...the people’s participation in decision making through the choice, accountability and change of their representatives and governments” (Sigdi, Kaballo, 1995) becomes hollow in the absence of a requisite education to inform participants on the quality of alternatives as well as on the nature and mode of accountability, or on

how to proceed should such accountability not be forthcoming. For instance, despite periodic elections, miners in the Appalachian Valley returned the same officials to office and in two successive general elections in South Africa, voters in the province of KwaZulu-Natal have returned the Inkatha Freedom Party, a party dominated by traditional authorities, to the government of the province.

I want to argue in this paper that societies and communities are either educated into subservience to authoritarianism or out of subservience into participatory democracy. Either way, a process of socialisation which reinforces norms and values specific to each form of rule is a precondition to the success of each regime. I do concede that despite this process of socialisation, a good formal education is on its own a liberator. Hence there exist strong correlations between what approximates true participatory democracy and a critical mass of formally well educated citizens. For instance, Western Europe, the United States and Japan do not only enjoy advanced economic conditions, they also command well educated mass bases. Consequently, democracy operates relatively more smoothly than is the case in countries with a poorly educated mass base such as is the case in a number of countries in Africa and Latin America. Education widens the range of options both political and economic and also facilitates access to information and the capacity to use that information prudently.

There are two critical questions which need answers if an assessment of education as a precondition for democracy has to be made. The first is: How do non democratic regimes manage to exclude masses from participation if participation is a desirable condition for accessing resources which everybody needs and wants?. And the second is: Under what conditions do the masses break from the stalemate of exclusion?. In the first instance individuals and groups are socialised or educated out of participation either by being denied access to information or by suppressing their capacity to utilise that information discerningly. In the second case individuals and groups are given the capacity to analyse and appraise their own situation. Both processes involve a form of education.

The Mobilisation of Bias

With regard to the maintenance and sustenance of exclusionary conditions Schattschneider, Gaventa, Bachrac and Baratz have responded by advancing the concept of mobilisation of bias where an ensemble of ideological and institutional practices is employed by those in power to exclude masses from true democracy through compliance, depoliticisation and fear. Through a process of mobilisation of bias critical items are either organised out of the agenda or reformulated in terms favourable to the elite. Relations of power are mediated in various ways, the most subtle, and therefore successful of which, is ideology. In the exclusion of masses from democratic participation, ideology is a powerful educational tool. Conversely, to see through ideological smokescreens and to be able to organise and mobilise against oppression, individuals have to overcome the mobilisation of bias. In the words of Paulo Freire the oppressed need a pedagogue who will enable them to break through the ideological chains of authoritarianism and oppression.

Democracy as a Concept and in Practice

Before we discuss how the mobilisation of bias has been employed successfully by authoritarian elites to exclude masses from participatory democracy, a closer examination of the concept of democracy itself is necessary. Offe described democracy as “a (system) of equal political rights of participation and representation within a framework of strongly protected individual liberties and divisions of state powers” (Claus Offe, 1955: 21). For Offe two principal participants are vital to the functioning of a representative democracy. They are:

- i. The citizens; and
- ii. elites (representative).

It is when the balance of power between mass citizens and representative elites shifts in favour of the elites that true democracy ceases to exist. Hence, according to Offe, democratic forms of government

have a life cycle. “Democracies are born at a certain point in time and under certain circumstances and it would at least be naive to exclude the possibility that they can die.” (*Ibid*: 21). What is of interest to analysts are the preconditions for the birth and the sustenance of democracy as well as those conditions which may be employed to kill or subvert democracies. Both conditions pertain to the relations between citizens and elites.

Giddens would maintain that Offe’s definition of democracy stops at a set of representative institutions guided by certain values and therefore falls short of explaining relations between participants. It thus suffers the limitations of liberal democracy (see below). In Giddens’s conception there is an extended definition to include deliberative democracy as “a way of getting or trying to get agreement about policies in the political arena”. The deliberative ideal “starts from the premise that political preferences will conflict and that the purpose of democratic institutions must be to resolve this conflict”. He continues: “for such conflict resolution to be democratic...it must occur through an open and uncoerced discussion of the issue at stake with the aim of arriving at an agreed judgement (Giddens, 1998: 113)”.

Giddens’ extended definition makes certain assumptions which are vital for the operation of the true democracy.

i) There should be recognised and acknowledged equality among participants so that views expressed by the various parties are accepted as being of equal value.

ii) For such views to be acceptable by all parties as being of equal value there should be equal access to information and a corresponding capacity by all parties to process information. This is particularly essential when taking into account that deliberative democracy accepts that solutions are contested.

The above assumptions call for a levelling of the playing field. Part of this levelling of the playing field entails accountability which implies the right to, and availability of, information on the activities of delib-

erative assemblies, and in the case of representative democracy on the activities of elected representatives. The right to, and availability of, information would not be of much help if those to whom information is made available do not have the power or capacity to utilise such a right for the public advantage.

Democracy and Civil Society

There has always been general consensus on the positive correlation between true democracy and the existence of a vibrant civil society. (Mills, Jefferson, Giddens, Frere, Mamdani etc). A vibrant civil society means active citizenship and fulfils one of the conditions set by Offe as vital to the functioning of a democracy. Referring to the role of education in the creation and promotion of active citizenship Martin quotes Johnson who states: “In every era people have needed ‘really useful knowledge’ (i.e. knowing why) as well as merely ‘useful knowledge’ (i.e. knowing what and how) in order to act collectively as citizens.” (Martin, I.: 1999). It is, however, our understanding of the meaning of citizenship that situates education and democracy in perspective. Different conceptions of citizenship and, therefore, of democracy bring with them distinctive forms of education as a precondition for each form of citizenship. A closer look into these forms of citizenship will help place education in perspective.

Liberal Democracy

Giddens refers to liberal democracy as “essentially a system of representation. It is a form of government characterised by regular elections, universal suffrage, freedom of conscience and the universal right to stand for office or to form political associations.” (Giddens, 1994: 112). Were it not for the relativity with which the foregoing attributes are enjoyed in practice, liberal democracy would be the ultimate ideal. Shortcomings have been found more in emphasis than in the concept. Liberal democracy has placed an accent on the operation of market

forces as if such operation takes place on a *tabula rasa*. My contention is that market forces are driven ideologically where access to them is mediated through relations of power and powerlessness. In liberal democracy, citizenship is constructed in terms of production and consumption as if the two were ends in themselves and also as if there were no intervening factors between production and consumption. The fact of life is that there are. I would argue for the non-independence of market forces on the simple basis that a number of processes mediate between individuals and the market place. Part of these processes entail the handicaps that prevent certain groups and individuals from entering the market place altogether, and those that limit individuals and groups from full participation. In South Africa, for instance a separatist educational system ensured that 'non-citizens' as defined out of mainstream society by apartheid were handicapped by their educational system despite what appeared to be equivalent paper qualifications. As a consequence there was a disproportionately large school drop out rate among Africans. The result is that despite the new democratic constitution which provides for equal participation by all citizens in the economy, significant managerial positions in the market place are filled by white citizens far out of proportion to their overall numbers in the population. This is in spite of corrective or affirmative action measures adopted in employment policies. This is equally true in the significant sections of the public sector. For instance, while whites account for less than fifteen percent of the total population, over eighty percent of positions of control in the South African Police Services are occupied by white persons. Given the significance of a professional and neutral police service in the operation of a democracy, and the racial origins of conflict in the South African political history, the question is: to what extent would democracy depend on the professional neutral role of the police services especially in the management of racial conflict should such conflict spill over from the debating chambers into living space? At one extreme the police could hold parliament and the whole country to ransom. Quoting Paulo Frere, Martin posits the idea that human beings are more than economic animals. He contends that it is not only

that “our ontological vocation is to produce and consume and to have rather than to be.” (*Op. cit.*). Realising the centrality of education in the attainment of its constructed form of democracy, liberal democracy has introduced an ideology which has modelled educational practice along the lines of production institutions and units. This has resulted in funding formulas for universities being based on the compatibility of university administration and curricula with corporate values of production. The consequences are far reaching for both education and democracy. Where education for democracy stresses the primacy of education as a public service designed to address social ills, liberal democracy driven by corporate culturalism emphasises the role of education as the preparation of individuals for the filling of slots in the social division of labour. So pervasive is the corporate influence on education that Giroux decries its impact on research as eroding the basic freedoms of individuals and societies. Citing the case of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other institutions of higher education in the United States which have entered into partnerships with corporations and sold part of their curricula to private corporations, thus ignoring basic scientific research, Giroux quotes Ralph Nader who asserts that “the universities are doing far too little to develop anti malaria and tuberculosis vaccines at a time when these diseases are once again killing large numbers of people in the third world countries.” (Giroux, 1999).

The conception of citizenship in liberal democracy creates a fundamental tension in education as a precondition for democracy, primarily because of the core values. True democracy is a means to an end where participation leads to the realisation of justice, equality, freedom, respect for the rule of law and solidarity, all of which cannot be measured in commercial terms. Such values cannot be substituted or replaced by productive and consumptive capacities which are only means and not ends in themselves.

The onus to correct the imbalances of the liberal democratic conception of citizenship rests with educated citizens who can and should recognise the fallacy of equating the corporate principles of efficiency with public virtues such as freedom, equality and justice.

Traditionalism

A traditionalist conception of citizenship arises out of a blurring of boundaries between the religious and the secular. The consequences are a diffusion of roles where traditional authorities conceive of themselves as representatives of their populations. Citizens are defined or treated mainly as subjects despite the provisions in the national constitutions. The rights of traditional elites (often ascribed) override those of ordinary citizens in the name of culture and tradition. Part of the cause of this state of affairs is the scarcity of resources leading to a lack of, or an inadequate, education, both formal and instrumental, on the part of the masses who, because of this, lack the intellectual tools of reasoning and aspirations compatible with democracy.

This is particularly so in post colonial societies where traditionalism has mediated between elites and citizens, leading to the development of a bifurcated state, the rural and urban sections. Relatively better economic and, therefore, educational conditions have, in this case, led to the development of a secular culture contributing to the rise of a vibrant civil society in urban areas. The opposite has occurred in rural areas. This was particularly in the interests of both the colonial powers, who saw an advantage in keeping colonial societies subservient through indirect rule, and the co-opted traditional elites who co-operated in this dominance, albeit qualified, in order to retain their relative advantage of privilege. The bifurcated state has had to enjoy limited democracy where at the rural extreme there was, and still exists, representation with very little if any significant participation. Therefore, despite electoral reforms targeted at the central state, the local state in rural areas is saddled with a decentralised despotism (Mamdani, 1996). The debate by traditional authorities over the demarcation of boundaries in South Africa referred to above falls squarely within this domain. Neither market forces nor true participatory democracy operate in rural areas, the first because traditional power is ascribed and not market determined hence ordinary citizens have no access to it; and the second because access to decision making is predicated on ascriptive criteria which exclude ordinary citizens. It is only when a critical mass of citi-

zens is educated enough to break from the shackles of tradition that the countryside will be freed from elite oppression.

Educating for Democracy

Speaking at the International IDEA Democracy Forum held in Stockholm in 1997 about accessing participatory democracy to the masses of the people, Frene Ginwala, the Speaker of the South African legislature, declared: “There are only two alternatives, either you bring the law maker’s language closer to the people, or you raise the educational levels of the entire population” (Ginwala, 1997). The truth is that there is only one alternative, to raise the educational levels of the entire population. The first alternative of bringing the law maker’s language closer to the people means writing laws in simple language that people will understand. That is an automatic step to exclusion through participation. The complex relationships inherent in legal systems are conceptual and not linguistic. Simplifying these complex relationships loses the nuances, and hence the masses will be participating as juniors or subordinates and not as equals.

Critical Pedagogy

A sound education broadens the cognitive frames of reference, develops the capacity to think critically, and facilitates the range of options. Commenting on the limitations of the philosophical traditions of liberalism and republicanism in American education, Karpol Barry advances the concept of a critical pedagogy as a means to promote transformation in education in order to educate for democracy. According to the author, as a pedagogy: “This acknowledges social injustices and examines with care and in dialogue with itself and others how injustice works through the discourses, experiences, and desires that constitute daily life and subjectivities of the student who invests in them” (Karpol Barry, 1993). What are these injustices, discourses, experiences and subjectivities? They are the experiences of power and power-

lessness leading to participation and exclusion from participation. They are predicated on ideology, race, class, gender and social origin, and together they constitute and define citizenship. They are complex relationships which can not be simplified in linear explanations, and to understand and appraise them critically calls for an enabling education.

Fundamental conceptions of democracy from Plato and Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas and Gramsci are premised on an education designed to develop in each individual the fundamental capacity to think critically and an ability to find one's way in life. Gramsci refers to this type of education as a common basic education imparting a general humanistic formative culture. (Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds., 1971). In political terms, an education for democracy will educate students in the analysis of how power works in producing and shaping knowledge and how ideological barriers to democracy such as class, race, age, gender and birthplace lead to one form of domination or another. It is an accepted truism that critical thinking is not only a function of inherent genetic capacity, but is also mediated through an education that equips individuals to analyse situations, work out alternatives and make informed choices.

Conclusion

It is evident from the discourse in this paper, that an education mediated by different conceptions of citizenship is instrumental in promoting the hegemonic concepts and practices at a given time. The variant of democracy operating at the time will be a function of the dominant ideals and practices. However, as a concept education has immutable and fundamental properties which transcend ideologies. It is both an enabler and a leveller. The capacity to access information, to select the relevant from the general, and to process that information critically is fundamental to choice, and it is on the basis of informed options that individuals make valid choices. If democracy is about freedom of choice, equity and justice, then education is a precondition for democracy.

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