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Neoliberal Ideology and Democratic Learning

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Abstract

In “Challenging Freedom: Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Democratic Education,” the author suggests that the presumed decline of democratic learning in public schooling follows from two primary forces: (a) the metaphysical implications of Cartesian psychophysical dualism that support an ontological understanding of the self as distinct from social influence and (b) a corresponding concept of freedom emerging from this ontology that exonerates individuals from any meaningful level of social moral responsibility. Although we agree in large part with the general argument advanced in the essay, there are some theoretical and historical gaps that we attempt to bridge in this response. We initially entertain the author’s proposed relationship between Cartesian ontology and the neoliberal conception of freedom. We then consider whether this understanding of freedom is coherent with a political commitment to democracy. Next, we expand on the article’s discussion of the relationship between democracy and education by suggesting that public schools since their inception have served primarily as instruments to disseminate capitalist ideology. Finally, we propose several principles of learning to advance democratic education in schools.

This article is in response to

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IN “CHALLENGING FREEDOM: Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Democratic Education,” the author suggested that the presumed decline of democratic learning in public schooling follows from two primary forces: (a) the metaphysical implications of Cartesian psychophysical dualism that support an ontological understanding of the self as distinct from social influence and (b) a corresponding concept of freedom emerging from this ontology that exonerates individuals from any meaningful level of social moral responsibility.

Although we agree in large part with the general argument advanced in the essay, there are some theoretical and historical gaps that we attempt to bridge in this response. We initially entertain the author’s proposed connection between Cartesian ontology and the neoliberal conception of freedom and suggest any actual causal relationship is probably overstated. We then

consider whether the neoliberal understanding of freedom identified by the author is consistent with a political commitment to democracy. The major discussion mostly missing in “Challenging Freedom” requires an exploration of the relationship among prevailing economic interests, conceptions of freedom, and U.S. public education. We address that deficit by expanding on the

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paper's brief discussion of the relationship between democracy and education and suggest that public schools since their inception have served primarily as instruments to disseminate capitalist ideology. Finally, in our concluding remarks, we propose several fundamental principles of learning to advance actual democratic education in U.S. schools.

Conceptions of Freedom and Democratic Responsibility

There is probably no other philosopher in the history of Western thought who has endured more criticism for virtually every contemporary political and practical problem than 17th-century philosopher René Descartes. It is small surprise, then, that Descartes and his infamous quest for epistemic certainty reflected in *cogito ergo sum* is blamed for the misguided and antidemocratic neoliberal conception of freedom identified in "Challenging Freedom." Although the author drew an interesting intellectual connection between psychophysical dualism and neoliberalism, the actual evidence demonstrating such a relationship is decidedly scant. For example, it is at least equally probable—and perhaps more so—that the neoliberal conception of freedom described by the author follows from the influence of Mill's (1859) essay *On Liberty* and, in particular, his comments on economic freedom. Mill argued that economies function best when left to their own devices, and government intervention in the economic affairs of society is counterproductive and despotic (p. 131).

Whether Descartes actually contributed to the idea that freedom includes a complete absence of social responsibility is mostly postulation and, we contend, perhaps even irrelevant to the actual issue under examination. The more salient question raised by "Challenging Freedom" is whether the neoliberal conception of freedom can be morally or coherently sustained within a democratic political context. We elaborate on this issue by considering Berlin's (1969) seminal essay on the relationship among freedom, ethics, and political structure: "Two Concepts of Liberty."

From Berlin's (1969) perspective, there is no sustainable distinction between political theory and moral theory since the former merely extends individual values into the social realm, and, therefore, "political theory is a branch of moral philosophy" (p. 2). His analysis supported the relationship between the individual freedom cited by Mill (1859) in *On Liberty* and the wider social freedom protected by democracy as a political system. In his essay, however, Berlin also grappled with the tension sometimes created when the exercise of individual freedoms clashes with the exercise of freedoms and rights of other citizens.

The issue of coercion rests at the center of Berlin's (1969) analysis of freedom since an individual cannot be free to act and forced into acting at the same time. Berlin described the problem this way:

I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond

a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be enslaved. (p. 4)

Suffice to say, the almost blanket rejection of social interference is the foundational tenet in the conception of freedom adopted by neoliberal advocates and largely represented in "Challenging Freedom" through the ideas of Hayek. His general position was that government interference in the economy leads to a form of totalitarianism by constraining free market exchange. Alternatively, Berlin drew our attention to the considerable moral problems provoked by such an absolute understanding of freedom within a democracy. As he put it:

What troubles the conscience of Western liberals is not that the freedom that men seek differs according to their social or economic conditions, but that the minority who possess it have gained it by exploiting, or, at least, averting their gaze from, the vast majority who do not. (p. 4)

Philosophically speaking, freedom, although widely considered a moral good, has seldom been praised in an absolute sense devoid of any social responsibility. One of the more radical conceptions of freedom is found within Rousseau's (1984) political philosophy, one that arguably influenced both the French and the American Revolutions, where his aim was designing social and political institutions to ensure "each [citizen], uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself, and remains as free as before" (p. 24). An agent's freedom to act in both Kantian deontology and Mill's (1859) utilitarianism is ethically mitigated by more significant consideration of its potential impact on others. The categorical imperative demands that moral agents universalize their individual choices or actions to consider their ethical impact on society (Kant, 2012). Mill's utilitarianism, consistent with consequentialist ethics, similarly demands that we consider the broader effects of our behavior. Indeed, utilitarianism posits that the purpose of morality, and by extension political structure, is to increase the amount of pleasure and happiness in the world while decreasing the amount of pain and unhappiness (Mill, 2007).

In *Existentialism and Human Emotion*, Sartre (1987), the same philosopher who proclaimed that humans are absolutely free, advocated for an existentialist ethic that entails a profound social responsibility to pursue freedom in a manner where the freedom of other persons is unimpeded by individual actions: "And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (p. 15). Sartre contended that valuing other people's freedom in addition to appreciating our own is necessary to maintain logical consistency. We cannot avoid recognizing that we are inherently free, and, therefore, we choose freedom, and any decision to devalue the freedom of others undermines the choice of freedom as a universal ethical good.

Since the value of freedom according to existentialism is self-evident to anyone who carefully considers the nature of ethical action, it would be incoherent for individuals to act in a way that undermines freedom's universal moral value. In other words, the

attempt to deny freedom to others is unsustainable because it undermines the universal moral value of individual freedom. In a fashion that reflects this same ethical responsibility to others, Berlin (1969) argued that “if the liberty of myself or my class or nation depends on the misery of a number of other human beings, the system which promotes this is unjust and immoral” (Sartre, 1987, p. 5). As a mode of production that thrives on the exploitative appropriation and distribution of significant surplus labor to secure its conditions of existence (Resnick & Wolff, 1987), neoliberal capitalism is arguably such an unjust and immoral system.

A nonegalitarian economic system such as neoliberalism more probably reflects a misguided form of neo-Hobbesian absolutism that protects sovereign, or in this case hegemonic aristocratic, power while demonstrating callous disregard for human dignity by elevating the concept of freedom without regard for equity. Contemporary supporters of this “social contract” philosophy include Canadian American philosopher Gauthier (1986):

The rich man may feast on caviar and champagne, while the poor woman starves at his gate. And she may not even take the crumbs from his table, if that would deprive him of his pleasure in feeding them to his birds. (p. 218)

In the words of welfare economics expert and Nobel Prize recipient Sen (1992), the neoliberal strategy is about “justifying inequality through equality” (p. 21). Although neoliberals demand individual freedom for all citizens, the actual freedom to act rests predominantly in the hands of the economic elite.

The author of “Challenging Freedom” convincingly demonstrated that the success of the neoliberal conception of freedom owes much to its consistency with core assumptions about the modern liberal identity—namely, the chasm between nature and self and the supposedly subjective source of knowledge and moral judgments. However, failing to locate this discussion within the ideological limits of capitalist rationality undercuts the author’s critique of the neoliberal understanding of freedom and the moral relationship between individuals and a democratic society.

The author of “Challenging Freedom” was correct in so far as neoliberals such as Friedman (1962) exploit a crude understanding of freedom—Friedman defined *freedom* as the “absence of coercion of a man by his fellow man” (p. 14)—that enables those with power and position to act in an unfettered individual fashion to the detriment of society. This definition of freedom creates a situation where the dominant understanding of and commitment to “freedom” eliminates any hint of democratic education that focuses on community welfare or progressive social reform. Indeed, the self-interested—if not entirely selfish—political ethics following from this perspective threatens not only democratic learning in public education but also democratic commitment to equal opportunity. We must confront the important moral problem, then, of striking a balance between the democratic freedom to act without coercion and the democratic moral responsibility to respect the rights, freedoms, and opportunities of others. As Berlin (1969) correctly observed about any democratic context respecting

the fundamental principles of social justice, “We cannot remain absolutely free, and must give up some of our liberty to preserve the rest” (p. 5).

As a discursive ploy, the concept of *freedom* is frequently used as an ideological device by neoliberals to provoke public opinion against government intervention in economic and social matters, but its actual relationship to democracy is largely assumed rather than demonstrated. In fact, the understanding of freedom reflected in neoliberal discourse is not connected to democratic societies in any other than rhetorical fashion. There is nothing in the concept of political democracy that supports a concept of freedom entirely removed from social responsibility. Indeed, it is perfectly conceivable that other forms of government, such as a dictatorship or anarchy, might permit individuals to act in such an unrestrained or unregulated manner. Berlin (1969) suggested that “freedom on this sense is not, at any rate logically, connected with democracy or self-government” (p. 6). In “The Ethics of Democracy,” Dewey argued that the relationship between the individual and society is highly interdependent. Individual citizens have an interest in society, just as society has an interest in them. The condition and circumstances of one citizen inevitably affect the conditions and circumstances of others. The individual cannot act democratically without significant consideration of how such action impacts on society as a whole (Micheletti, 2011).

Public Schools and Democratic Education

When referring to how the history of public schooling in the United States has been rife historically with contestation and conflict over schooling goals, values, and beliefs, the author of “Challenging Freedom” rightly, albeit briefly, contended that “it is debatable whether United States public education ever held a central role for its civic purposes” (p. 3). In our view, the lack of attention afforded to meaningful democratic learning in U.S. schools is a demonstrable reality of domestic public education. Neo-Marxist Althusser (1971) offered a poignant analysis of public school development in which he suggested the expanding suffrage of Western democracies after the 19th century prompted the aristocratic hegemony to pursue greater mechanisms of ideological control over public consciousness through education.

Until the 19th century, when its political power began to wane in the face of a rising bourgeoisie class, the Church had largely dominated control over public consciousness. Within England’s fledgling 19th-century democracy, formal electoral political participation was restricted to “gentlemen” who possessed sufficient economic standing measured by sufficient property ownership. With the rise of the bourgeoisie class, and the class disruption previously provoked by the French and American Revolutions, other groups began demanding increased political participation in the formal electoral process. As Althusser (1971) correctly posited, it was during this push toward universal suffrage that the development of public schooling gained considerable momentum. Public schooling, with its broad social influence, afforded the aristocracy a more modern vehicle to “wrap students in ruling ideology” (p. 134), thereby shielding the prevailing economic order from fundamental

structural change. Following from Althusser's analysis, then, the examination of contemporary democratic education pursued in "Challenging Freedom" should have included some consideration of historically constituted social and power relations and their relationship to U.S. public education. The analysis of neoliberalism's impact on democratic education we provide below is framed within the ideological parameters of social regulation and the normalizing of people through curriculum (Popkewitz, 2015).

During the early 20th century, the social purpose of schools was a hotly contested topic in the United States. Dewey, a champion of democratic progress, and Snedden, a social efficiency proponent, debated the role of public education. Similar to current neoliberal ideologues, Snedden viewed social stratification as an inevitable outcome of individual capacity and, correspondingly, condemned any attempt to overcome the assumed natural order. Snedden held as an axiom that most students, a group he postulated at 80%, would only benefit from a schooling experience that prepared them directly for work (Drost, 1967). He argued that the only acceptable education was one that prepared most students for immediate occupational placement within the existing industrial structure.

Reflecting his Hegelian-based confidence in individual and social progress, Dewey (1916) was a trenchant critic of Snedden's social-efficiency framework, the latter having interestingly gained widespread popularity among both industry leaders and labor associations. Dewey warned that such an education—and this warning is perhaps even more salient within neoliberal culture—merely validated class stratification by perpetuating an educational philosophy of social predestination:

Any scheme of vocational education, which takes as its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination. (p. 318)

Dewey rejected the idea of students as passive objects subject to the whims of market economy forces. In his view, students as future democratic citizens were constructors of knowledge, living and working in a world of dynamic social beings with the existential capacity to shape and transform their social, political, and economic experiences (Hyslop-Margison, 2000).

The current ideological onslaught confronting U.S. public schools has increasingly permeated the secondary education sector. The massive return of soldiers after World War II, followed by the force and scope of the U.S. civil rights movement, gave rise to an unprecedented demand for access to higher education. The same ideological approach to education described by Althusser (1971) that targeted the manipulation of student consciousness was accordingly applied to higher education. The community college rapidly gained prominence as the educational alternative to universities for millions of American students. In fact, and despite the hyperinflated discursive rhetoric of accessibility and democracy, the community college effectively functioned as "midwife for humbler expectations" (Brint, 2003, p. 32), and a relentless class

struggle to "vocalize" junior colleges was instigated (Ramírez, 2006). The tiered vocational education envisioned and defended by Snedden began to effectively track mass numbers of those who are in the cultural and linguistic minority into two-year colleges, effectively shielding elite institutions and their privileged students from the education-for-work approach. In their 1976 groundbreaking book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis quoted sociologist Etzioni of Columbia University: "If we can no longer keep the floodgates closed at the admissions office, it at least seems wise to channel the general flow away from four-year colleges and toward two-year extensions of high school in the junior and community colleges" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 203).

The current overrepresentation of those who are in the minority in community colleges and their underrepresentation in four-year universities (akin to overrepresentation in remedial education and underrepresentation in gifted programs within public schools) indicates the success of this strategy. Equally indicative is the low rate of students who currently transfer from community college and earn a degree in a four-year institution (16.2%) but do so in a period of six years (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014). Every year, the overwhelming enrollment of Hispanics in two-year colleges and their low transfer rate prompts numerous applications to federal grants by institutions serving large numbers of Hispanic students, including entire representative systems such as California State University (Department of Education, 2015). Despite the blatant demographic disparities evident after analyses of this kind, educational initiatives that pursue massification serve to placate the masses since they ostensibly receive an education consistent with democratic principles.

The debate over the best way to educate once again became prominent in the 1970s, when a cyclical overaccumulation crisis in capitalism was conveniently reconstructed and recontextualized as a crisis in education (Ramírez, 2008). The publication and dissemination of the report "A Nation at Risk" epitomizes the convenient positioning of public education as simultaneously scapegoat (taking the blame for economic ills) and panacea (as the only route to lead to economic success). More pointedly, the deflecting of economic responsibility onto public education serves the ideological objective of insulating the prevailing structural system from criticism or reform.

Other notable scholars also highlight the ways economic crises have been historically redirected to education in the interest of capitalism. For example, Pinar (2011) described the neoliberal ideological shifting of moral responsibility as follows:

Employing a classic "blame-the-victim" tactic, politicians have insisted that educators are to blame, and not just for what they judge to be low test scores. In the 1950s and early 1960s teachers were blamed for jeopardizing the American military position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and, in the early 1980s, for US currency and devaluation. Now teachers are held "accountable" for America's economic performance in the "new millennium," distracting the public from the unethical and unprofitable practices of many American businesses. . . . As it turns out, "accountability" is nothing more than a "projection" onto

educators of that ethical responsibility to the public many businessmen and politicians themselves so profoundly lack. (p. 182)

The current blame-the-victim rhetoric supported by neoliberal accountability measures such as the increase in standardization, quantification, and competition relies on ill-conceived devices of transparency, through which various forms of school data are made available to the public. Instead of promoting any meaningful form of democratic learning or addressing the social structure of opportunity, public reporting of schools is employed as political spectacle (Koyama & Kania, 2014); the charade of accountability reflects the sole intent to legitimize political action to undermine what neoliberals and their think tanks openly call “the cult of public education” (Carter, 2001, p. 34).

The contemporary milieu of public education initiated by the “A Nation at Risk” report gave rise to the standards movement that later morphed into the standardized assessment movement. All of these movements provide significant evidence to support the claim on the escalating ideological role of U.S. schools. In his article “The Neoliberal Attack on Education,” Giroux (2012) argued that “public education is under assault . . . the most serious attack is being waged by advocates of neoliberalism, whose reform efforts focus narrowly on high-stakes testing, traditional texts and memorization drill” (p. 1). High-stakes testing decontextualizes public education and situates responsibility for teaching and learning—read as accountability—entirely at the micro level of analysis. Administrators, teachers, and students become neoliberal scapegoats for weak academic achievement, while the social structure of opportunity, the most important determinant of academic achievement, is entirely removed from scrutiny. The emphasis on memorization reported by Giroux also situates students—to employ a Freirean understanding—as empty vessels into which decontextualized information is dumped for future retrieval. When students are habituated into this passive epistemological role, they become easy future targets for the neoliberal manipulation of their consciousness. They also learn to view themselves as passive objects in society rather than as transformative agents of structural change.

In spite of the intensifying impact of neoliberal ideology, public education was never developed historically as a vehicle for democratic teaching and learning. As mentioned in the reviewed article and expanded upon in this section of our response, the contestation among opposing political forces over the purpose of schools within democratic societies constitutes a long-standing debate in curriculum discourse. There is considerable force to the idea advanced by Althusser (1971) that public schools have always provided the economic elite with a vehicle to control the political predilections of the masses. The current imposition of neoliberal market assumptions into education merely extends and deepens that troubling historical trend.

Conclusion

We enthusiastically agree with the author of “Challenging Freedom” that contemporary U.S. public schools reflect a worrisome monolithic perspective on education that considers work preparation the only important learning outcome. This narrow

preoccupation includes a profound ideological commitment to situate structural problems in students and schools rather than within the social structure of opportunity. We also support the idea that the neoliberal conception of freedom undercuts the role of education as a vehicle to advance social responsibility and concern for the welfare of other citizens. However, we are far less convinced that this superficial understanding of freedom emerges from Cartesian metaphysics as much as it does from ideological manipulation and a convenient denial of the inevitable interaction between the individual and an ethical democratic society.

Perhaps the other missing piece within “Challenging Freedom” is a discussion of what actual democratic learning might include. Although addressing this subject fully involves a protracted and comprehensive discussion of pedagogical options, we conclude this article by sharing three central principles of democratic learning identified in our previous scholarship: (a) Democratic teaching respects student rationality by encouraging critique of curriculum content. When students are deprived of the opportunities to question what they are learning, they become the passive objects of education rather than participatory subjects in democratic learning. (b) Democratic teaching provides students with alternative viewpoints and perspectives on issues relevant to vocational and social experience. If students are expected to make informed, critical, democratic choices, they require exposure to different perspectives on curriculum matters. (c) Democratic teaching does not depict social and economic conditions as fixed or predetermined but explicitly recognizes the legitimate right of students to transform structural experience through informed political participation (Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2001).

In the final analysis, these pedagogical practices are designed to promote student understanding that society is a dynamic and transformable construct rather than a static and inexorable one. Such an understanding stands not only at the core of democratic learning within public schools but of any meaningful conception of what constitutes a democratic society. The type of scholarship pursued by the author of “Challenging Freedom” contributes mightily to a broadened understanding on the integral relationship between public education and democratic society. In that sense, the article takes an important stride toward fostering wider understanding on the agential role of students in creating a democratic society where individual action is ethically mitigated by social responsibility.

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