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Commentary: The Failure of Social Education or Just Going Down the Road of Post-Democratic Politics?

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The paper “American democracy is distress: The failure of social education” presents several “symptoms of democracy’s dysfunction in the United States”. These include the extreme reliance on campaign contributions, giving the donors – economic elites and groups representing business, frequently operating at a transnational level – an excessive power in determining government policy in areas such as the environment, media or fiscal regulations, as profusely exemplified in the paper. At the same time, policies impose restrictions on citizens’ rights in areas such as voting, healthcare or employment. In this sense, the power gap between citizens and economic elites in the form of a global capital is growing and, as it goes undisputed and unchallenged, menaces the core of democracy itself.

On the second part of the paper, the author rests on the classical assumption of “democracy’s dependence on and educated citizenry” but also on the recognition that this is a marginal concern in educational policy, discourse and practice. The need for a political education that will “prepare democratic citizens who can participate critically and effectively in shaping the direction and quality of social life” is therefore seen as an essential role of public schooling. However, “there is little concern that high school students are not often asked to critique the structure of society and its institutions, and imagine other possibilities”. In the author’s opinion, this has been contributing to a decline in voter turnout, but also to a deficit in political knowledge, political interest and civic engagement, that substantiate the vision that “Millennials, far from being civic-minded, are the most narcissistic generation in recent history”.

Finally, schools appear to be overwhelmed with other concerns – standardized testing or the emphasis on employability skills – and political education is not really a priority:

“When dull, superficial, uncritical, biased textbooks are combined with a pervasive conception of instruction as knowledge transmission and dictates to address massive sets of facts and information, and maintain order in classrooms of thirty to forty students, it is perhaps understandable how preparation of young people for critical, contested political participation gets short-changed.

Nevertheless, the author concludes with a discussion of reasons to be hopeful that rest both within and beyond the school. Within school, the transformative potential of critical pedagogy and theoretical debates within the areas of social studies, history and civic and citizenship education; beyond schools the resisting vitality of demo-

cracy as revealed by social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, but also poverty, human rights or environmental activist groups.

This is a paper worth reading. Not only does it present an argument – and this is something to be praised and cherished –, but it also sustains its argument on a sound and systematic analysis of documents and research. As such, this is not a trivial paper. The data, analysis and argument the author develops call for our attention and challenge us to reflect on whether and how the situation described for the US resonates with the situation we are currently living in Europe. It is my strong belief that, apart from apparent differences, the problems that the author discusses articulate at a deeper level with phenomena we are witnessing in democratic regimes across the world, and particularly in Europe.

In fact, the paper shows, based on profusion of official reports and research, how political decision-making has become the *land-where-politics-is-a-stranger*. The foundations of political decisions are more and more determined by the interests of economic groups, financial institutions or industries generating a *corporate-led-politics* that undermines any hope for real politics. Real politics is the inevitably messy and conflictive land of pluralism and diversity in the discussion of opposing visions of the common good, the good of the “people” – that mythical collective and diverse “us” that we are continuously redefining. Corporate-led-politics is the land where decisions are made without even trying to consider any idea of the common good, as they are intrinsically and openly connected to the good of only a few.

This approach is clearly in line with Crouch’s vision of post-democracy (2001, 2004, 2014) who argues that a combination of factors such as the lack of a distinctive political identity of existing political parties, economic globalisation, and the growing direct influence of economic elites and lobbyists on politicians led to a situation where formal democracy has grown apart from citizens control:

“while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle (...). The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part (...). Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by the interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests. (2004, p.4).

Crouch admits that this might be an exaggeration, but that the ways democracy works is moving clearly in this

direction. His more recent analysis of the Eurozone crisis (2014) is a blatant demonstration of the process:

“The banks, having been deemed ‘too big to fail’, were given privileged treatment in setting the terms for rescue from the disaster to which their negligent behaviour had brought us all. Rescue packages placed the burden on the rest of the population through cuts in public spending, especially therefore on those most dependent on help from the welfare state, people far poorer than the bankers whose incomes and institutions they were now helping to stabilise. In the process, the crisis was redefined by political and corporate leaders as having been ‘caused’ by excessive levels of public spending. The crisis has therefore now been used to achieve permanent reductions in the size and scope of the welfare state in many countries. (p. 72).

In Portugal, Ireland and Greece this resulted in the intervention by a joint group involving the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. This group controlled the policies of national governments and insisted on the implementation of austerity measures that resulted in growth of poverty and unemployment. The discourse “there is no alternative” was used to legitimize such policies and still persists as a menace, even in countries like Greece and, more recently, Portugal where left wing coalitions tried to invert the austerity diktat. So, there are reasons for hope, also in Europe – I am also writing this in the aftermath of the elections in Holland where the Groen Links had a significant growth.

To make education accountable for this decline in democracy is the point where the author and I start to draw apart. Parallel to the situation described in the paper, since the mid-nineties, European countries became unanimously concerned with youth civic and political engagement and participation and promoted education reforms to foster what was then called citizenship education. For education policymakers across Europe, citizenship education became a central goal of education systems – that more and more pictured young people as irresponsible, ignorant and detached, and therefore the growing emphasis in the need to promote active but yet informed and responsible citizens. As in the US, however, this does not mean that the political rhetoric turned into a real priority of educational policy or practice (vd. Ribeiro, Caetano & Menezes, 2016).

I do follow the vision of Amy Gutman (1987), among others, that schools are co-responsible for the survival of democracy. And I even go further, valuing the point made by James Beane (1990), more than 20 years ago, that public schools in democratic regimes are institutions small enough to really guarantee a democratic experience, and therefore have a particular responsibility to function in order to provide such an experience, which implies putting into practice the principles of democracy, dignity and diversity. This implies, as John Dewey (1916) did, recognising that education is not ‘preparation for life’ but life itself. This experiential, hands-on perspective has significant implications in the vision of education, schools and children and youths.

However, this does not mean agreeing with the assumption that children and youth are ignorant, immature or unprepared for citizenship, an assumption that underlies many of the educational initiatives in this domain. On one part, because it enables policymakers, educational authorities, teachers and parents to assume that they should approach democracy and politics in a ‘simpler’ way, without the inevitable tensions, conflicts and antagonism that ‘come with the territory’ – as Chantal Mouffe (1996) clearly demonstrates. In a way, this vision of citizenship education proposes to address politics leaving the political outside (Monteiro & Ferreira, 2011), that is, without considering the political and moral conditions of children’s and young people’s everyday lives in- and out-of-school – and denying them the opportunity to acknowledge their ‘political existence’ both inside and outside schools as Gert Biesta (2016) would say. In fact, the paper’s call for a social education that approaches the dysfunctions of democracy echoes some of these concerns.

Nonetheless, on the other part, this also implies recognising children and youth as citizens in their own right – not as citizens-in- the-making, to use Marshall’s (1950) formulation. This questions the whole idea of education as preparing for ... well demonstrated in Reinhold Hedtke’s (2013) criticism of the paradoxical nature of guidance for political autonomy (see Simonneaux, Tutiaux-Guillon & Legardez, 2012 for another thoughtful discussion). This is also in line with the work of Biesta and Lawy (2006) and of Tristan McCowan (2009) who challenge us to consider the significance of lived democratic experiences, in- and out-of-school, as nurturing the continuous personal and collective construction of what it means to be a citizen, here and now.

The implication is overcoming a vision of a narcissistic generation that is not committed to civic and political participation: in fact, several theorists have emphasized that instead of a citizenship deficit we might be witnessing a participatory revolution (Kaase, 1984) with signs of a strong vitality across Europe and the world (Berger, 2009; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Haste & Hogan, 2006; Morales, 2005; Norris, 2002). Nevertheless, many of the emerging forms of civic and political participation are surely in line with the individualistic utopia (Lipovetsky, 1986) and the liquid (Bauman, 2000), self-expressive and anti-hierarchical (Beck, 2000) nature of our societies – and might even comply with Innerarity’s (2016) cautionary note that “indignation is a necessary but not sufficient civic virtue” (s/p). But to disregard these novel forms of civic and political participation is surely to discourage their participatory potential and the genuine will they might entail to become more active in the political realm. Children and young people, as narcissists as the rest of us, are experimenting with being citizens, but on their own terms, not ours. In my view, we should not minimize the political significance of these phenomena.

Additionally, I strongly believe that it is essential to contest a vision of “informed”, “active” and “responsible” citizens – by which the legislators probably imply

that “you can be active citizens, as long as you do it the right way”. Across time and space, from the American Revolution to the Resistance to fascist and autocratic regimes across Europe and beyond, individuals who have actively assumed their rights of citizenship have, at the same time, demonstrated a complete irresponsibility regarding both the existing status quo and their own personal safety. In fact, the discussion around the need for an unpolite (Monteiro & Ferreira, 2011) or non-conformist (Hedke, 2013) citizen comes from a similar reading. In most cases, knowledge and information were certainly not a pre-requisite for political action. In fact, political action frequently emerges from the gut reaction that underlies, as Walzer (2002) would say, the decision of ‘which side are we on’ – and therefore, the tendency to reduce political action to a rational, literate and informed positioning contradicts the affects, irrationality and frequently the irresponsibility that motivates political action in the real life. Emotions are a powerful way of knowing the world and their role in politics should not be denied but valued (Nussbaum, 2013).

To deny this is to limit the political to the educated citizens who are informed or competent enough to have a say in the definition of our common good. This is problematic not only because it corresponds to yet another elitist conceptions of citizenship, that disempowers those whose knowledge and competencies are not recognized as good enough. It is also problematic because, as Gert Biesta (2016, p.103) stresses, “it relies on the idea that the guarantee for democracy lies in the existence of a properly educated citizenry so that once all citizens have received their education, democracy will simply follow.”

Finally, it can also be problematic because it entails a vision of education as both redemption and remedy. This is, in a way, an easy solution, as education, schools and teachers are powerless enough to be easily regulated. What involves a significant political challenge and confrontation is the regulation of global capitalism – the economic elites, the transnational corporations – that flourish in our democracies governed under a model of corporate-led-politics. In order to achieve this, I do believe that we need both traditional and emerging ways of civic and political participation (Innerarity, 2016), that involve both engaging with and resisting formal politics (Crouch, 2001). My hope comes, now and again, from Hannah Arendt’s conviction that politics resists, always emerging in the “space-between-[inevitably different] people” as a relationship between equals in their diversity (1995 [1950], pp. 40-43). And it is through the resistance of politics as a plural, conflictive, emotional and rational discourse and action that the possibility of reinventing democracy, in- and out-of-schools, does exist.

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