

# Democracy, Education and the Need for Politics

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**Abstract** Even though the interrelationship between education and democratic politics is as old as democracy itself, it is seldom explicitly formulated in the literature. Most of the time, the political system is taken as a given, and education conceptualized as an instrument for stability and social integration. Many contemporary discussions about citizenship education and democracy in the Western world mirror this tendency. In the paper, I argue that, in order to conceptualise the socio-political potential of education we need to understand democracy in more political terms. This means that democracy can neither be seen primarily as a mode of associated living (Dewey), nor a model for handling different life-views (political liberalism à la Rawls and Gutmann). A third alternative is Gert Biesta's notion of democratic subjectification. Even though Biesta identifies depoliticising trends in citizenship education policies, I argue that his alternative still fails to be a sufficiently *political* alternative. What is lacking in Biesta is the explicit attention to political causes and the kind of collective activities that define a democracy: the creation of one's own laws, norms and institutions. This capacity of the collective to question and govern itself is put in relief by Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of "the project of autonomy".

**Keywords** Democracy · Educational theory · Politics/the political · Project of autonomy · Gert Biesta · Cornelius Castoriadis

## Introduction

This article elucidates the conception of politics in educational thought, and argues that educators in contemporary democracies need to pay more attention to political concerns, or "politics" in a specific sense of the term. The political importance of education for a

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democracy is of course as old as politics itself, from democracy's inception in ancient Greece.<sup>1</sup> In the democratic *poleis*, the great degree of what we today would call citizen participation—in administration, war and politics—called for, and in turn fostered, a well-educated *demos*<sup>2</sup> (Castoriadis 1991a; Hansen 1991; Heater 2004; Ober 2008). Although no 'state'—in the modern sense of the term—existed in the ancient Greek world, and hence no system for public education or educational policy as we know it, the quality of the political and collective life was seen as a direct result of good education (*paideia*).<sup>3</sup> Since then, the nature of the relationship between politics, education and democracy has been conceptualized at various points in history in quite diverse ways, e.g., by Rousseau, JS Mill, Durkheim, Dewey, Arendt and others—although not always as clearly as one may have wished.

An important exception is the period dubbed '1968'—which, of course, was manifested during the 1970s—as a time when the political nature of education became explicit in the literature and in public discourse. In the wake of the student revolts educational institutions across the Western world suddenly found themselves at the centre of ideological debates over the role of schooling (and socialization more generally) in the production of false consciousness and ideology in hierarchical, bourgeois societies, whose end products were uncritical consumers and mindless workers. As formulated by Joel Spring in 1975: "For those who seek to radically change this society [i.e. the modern industrial state] it is only natural to assume a critical attitude toward the school systems that have been designed to keep these forces in power" (Spring 1980, p. 8, my translation). While state-driven schools were seen as vehicles of the social machinery of capitalism, alternative pedagogies and locally driven schools flourished. A key idea at the time was that the future was open, not only to be influenced, but recreated: a thought that fuelled a strong interest and belief in the potential of education and its role in the creation of a new societal order.<sup>4</sup> Characteristic for the time was a more or less utopian belief in the possibility to create something entirely new, beyond the established institutional apparatus. This state of collective optimism did not, of course, include everyone, and could not last.

The 1980s in the Western world was a more ambiguous affair, representing on the one side a backlash to the impulse of 1968, with neoconservative politics and juvenile defeatism in the lingering logic of the Cold War, but also the surging forth of various subcultures and social movements. In university departments, postmodernism and post-structuralism made their entry, and a new discourse of identity politics was formed (Cusset 2003), arguably facilitated by a strange *mésalliance* between communitarians, feminists, indigenous people and other groups who were critical to the dominance of political liberalism. In the years to follow, identity politics and political liberalism became the most dominant trends in Western political thought. These are not clear-cut opposites, as the analysis will show, but, rather, complementary positions that have dominated much of the discourse on democracy and education since the late 1980s. Here is not the place, however, to give a full account of this rather complex field of thought; instead, it forms the backdrop for my discussion of the political aspects of the relationship between democracy and

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<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that women and slaves were not acknowledged as citizens, Greek democracies were highly inclusive compared to other polities at the time. See, e.g., Hansen (1991).

<sup>3</sup> This idea was splendidly formulated by Pericles in his funeral oration for the Athenians who fell in the Peloponnesian war (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, book II, 34–46).

<sup>4</sup> The belief in the ability to change society also has anthropological underpinnings, as discussed by Papastephanou (2014).

education. The relevance of identity politics and political liberalism in this context will hopefully become clearer as we proceed.

In the sections below I discuss three thinkers that are taken to represent more or less established positions in the literature on the relationship between democracy and education. Two of these, John Dewey and Amy Gutmann belong to the tradition of political liberalism while the third, Gert Biesta, can be seen as a postmodern thinker. Their respective conceptions of democracy in relation to education are discussed in the light of a specific distinction in political theory; a distinction that is identified by somewhat differing terms, but which will here be termed ‘the political’ versus ‘politics’, as applied by Cornelius Castoriadis (1991a, b, 2010). This distinction is often conflated in political theory, with a few exceptions notably in the works of Hannah Arendt, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière.<sup>5</sup>

‘The political’ (Fr. *le politique*) in the work of Castoriadis refers to the general type of political arrangements that is instituted in all known societies: “the power-related dimension within society, how it is exerted and access thereto” (Castoriadis 2010, p. 216). This type of arrangement is instituted in all known societies; for example, contemporary Western societies have the party system, the state apparatus and various supranational bodies. ‘Politics’ (Fr. *la politique*) has a broader range, “bearing on the [social] institution as a whole, including of course the power-related dimension” (p. 216–17). More precisely, for Castoriadis, politics is the explicit activity of *putting the established institution of society into question* (Castoriadis 1991b, p. 159). With a term borrowed from Hannah Arendt, we might call this ‘politics proper’. This dimension, according to Castoriadis, is *not* instituted in all known societies, but emerged with the co-creation of philosophy and democratic politics in ancient Greece, an event that is characterised by Castoriadis as ‘the project of autonomy’ (Castoriadis 1991a, b). Later democratic polities have, to a greater or lesser degree, sought to embody the project of autonomy—which for Castoriadis is always both an individual and a collective project—by instituting ‘politics’ as the capacity of a society to question itself: its laws, norms and institutions, and especially its relations of power (i.e. ‘the political’). For Castoriadis (1991a, 1997), this kind of instituted questioning is a defining feature of a (real) democracy.

The distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ is useful if we want to focus on the capacity of a theory to question and challenge existing institutions. It enables us, for example, to identify political theories that seek to posit existing institutions as (philosophical) norms, as Castoriadis (1997) accuses John Rawls of doing,<sup>6</sup> and to see that not all polities that call themselves democratic are embodiments of politics in the emphatic sense of ‘politics proper’. In the present discussion, I use the term ‘political democracy’ to denote a society that has instituted itself so as to embody this kind of political self-questioning.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The present discussion is complicated by the fact that the distinction is described in varying terminology, and that scholars sometimes use the terms politics/the political with almost opposite meanings. Chantal Mouffe, for example, uses the terms in a rather different way than I do here. In order to avoid misunderstandings, the term ‘politics proper’ is introduced.

<sup>6</sup> Papastephanou (2008) provides an eclatant analysis of this phenomenon seen through the lens of educational theory. Through an immanent critique, Papastephanou shows how Rawls’ political liberalism can be accused of harbouring comprehensive presuppositions that build on ‘particular’ presuppositions, thus drawing invalid conclusions.

<sup>7</sup> This is clearly a strongly politicized, even radical notion of democracy that is rarely found in real life. However, according to Castoriadis, the Greeks, and especially Athens in the sixth and fifth century BCE were driven by this kind of self-questioning and self-institution. The impulse for autonomy reemerged in early European modernity in the city states of Northern Italy and in the institutionalisation of Western liberal democracies (Castoriadis 1991a, 1997).

In educational theory, the distinction manifests itself, e.g., in the difference between theories of citizenship that aim at socio-political integration vis-à-vis theories aimed at political questioning and political creation. My guiding interest, in the following sections, is to see whether or not the notion of ‘politics proper’ is reflected in established theories of education for citizenship and democracy. A further conceptual distinction, to be developed along the way, is a notion of what I call the *who*, *how* and *what* of politics. These categories, I argue, are relevant for distinguishing between politics proper and what could be seen as more pre-political activities—or political preconditions, if you like—where the *what* of politics becomes a decisive category. Of course, in order to analyse these distinctions, it is unavoidable that some other theoretical nuances will be lost. I should also note that the *how*-question will receive less attention than the other two. The reason for this is twofold: first, the *how*-question—how to educate good citizens, how to exercise citizenship and so forth—is very well covered in the citizenship literature.<sup>8</sup> However, and secondly, it is problematic to focus on the *how*-question alone, if this means leaving out the *what*-question(s), such as: What do we mean by democracy, what ought to be the relationship between democracy and politics and what are the proper concerns for education in a democracy? These are normative, genuinely political questions that belong to the domain of educational theory and philosophy. My reasons for focusing on the *what*-question are therefore not only theoretical, but also political in order to question the instituted order.

## A Mode of Associated Living

John Dewey (1859–1952) has crafted what is probably the best known conception of the relationship between democracy and education. In his key work from 1916, *Democracy and Education*, he provides the following definition: «democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint associated experience» (Dewey 1997, p. 87). Although written a 100 years ago, this definition is still in frequent use in the literature—and student assignments—today.<sup>9</sup> We may wonder why this is so; after all, societies change, and political-educational analyses—being inherently historical—should of course be as updated as possible. Some answers are suggested further below.

Like most theorists, Dewey wrote with a specific situation in mind, namely the industrialization and urbanization in large cities such as Chicago, where spent the years prior to *Democracy and Education*. Dewey expresses grave concerns about a rapidly changing society with growing differences in living conditions between social classes and threats of social fragmentation and destabilization. At the time, there was no way of knowing what would come out of the workers’ struggles: political reforms or outright class war. Dewey’s conception of democracy is a response to this situation. His democratic vision was an open society, characterized by the ideals of self-improvement, creativity and most importantly, communication within and between groups. The democratic experience, referred in the quote, is fostered by a high degree of communication—inside and between groups—which secures a variety of shared viewpoints and common interests for the society in question

<sup>8</sup> The *how*-approach is especially close at hand for theories of deliberative and procedural democracy.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey’s thought has traditionally had a strong position in the Nordic nations, who are often thought to be fairly advanced in democratic understanding, with high scores in the Civic Education study of the IEA <http://www.iea.nl/cived.html>.

(Dewey 1997, p. 83ff). Thus the threats of differentiation and plurality—distrust and conflict—are tempered by communication and common experiences.

The urge for social integration is clear, but Dewey may have had more than one reason for foregrounding “associated living” at the cost of political governance. According to Carr and Hartnett (1996), Dewey was arguing against critics who claimed that democracy had become so complicated that it was unreasonable to expect that everyone should be an active part in it. By foregrounding experience, Dewey argues that social conditions and intersubjective relations are not only politically relevant, but the very fabric of democracy as a political regime. Furthermore, his theory emphasises the importance of general, public education by appealing to the higher purpose of democracy; a purpose that is in the public interest. This could explain why his notion of democracy is (at least partly) filtered through the lens of education.

In a speech from 1939, Dewey criticized traditional conceptions of representative democracy:

We acted as if democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany—or some other state capital—under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so—which is a somewhat extreme way of saying that we have had the habit of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonably faithful in performing political duties (*John Dewey: The Later Works 1925–1954*, Vol. 14, electronic version).

At the heart of Dewey’s conception was the pragmatist idea that democracy should not be viewed as a fixed set of institutions, thus reducing democratic education to specific skills, values etc., but rather as something ordinary people (citizens and students) *do, live and experience*. In the same spirit, political philosophy should concern itself with problems that ordinary people feel, and not abstract problems raised by philosophers (Carr and Hartnett 1996, p. 55). Democracy, for Dewey, is about ordinary people’s capacity for meaningful action and not just something that takes place in parliament and other institutions assigned for political purposes; it concerns everyone, and depends on the education of all. This means that democratic institutions, and knowledge about these institutions, are worthless without active citizens who question, research and create their conditions. More specifically, democracy aims at *growth* for all its members. If there are oppositions between groups, or if some are excluded from collective actions and processes, this growth cannot be realised. Accordingly, for Dewey:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life (Dewey, nd).

This quotation makes it clear that Dewey held political beliefs that must have been quite radical at the time, motives that, according to Carr and Hartnett, have been toned down in the course of reception (Carr and Hartnett 1996, p. 65). For Dewey, greater openness and interaction between groups—and we may read the question of race/colour into this—could release the human potential to recreate and improve the social and physical environment.

His ideal was a flexible society that would be able to handle tensions and to change itself. This would secure social cohesion and integration, and benefit the less privileged.

How do these ideals correspond to our contemporary situation? Without going into a detailed analysis, I would argue that, notwithstanding their radicalism at the time of origin, Dewey's conception of democracy as "internal and external communication", "shared interests" and a "mode of associated living" hardly represents a challenge to existing institutions today. One of the problems with his conception is that it does not distinguish between democracy as a political regime and plain social adaptation. Accordingly, almost any kind of pro-social activity may fit the definition. Without a sufficient distinction between social and political aspects of democracy, the concept becomes vulnerable to depoliticising trends, and most importantly, it loses capacity to foster political change.

Dewey's definition of democracy frequently appears in educational texts today, a century after it originated. This, I fear, is not so much due to its political relevance as a lack of theoretical effort. It is of course possible to think that Dewey's analysis is general enough to be able to tell us something about our present situation. However, it is also true that rather few contemporary scholars have raised the question of what the relationship between democracy, politics and education means, and should mean, today. Another, and in my opinion, important reason for the popularity of Dewey's conception is that it corresponds so well to the situation of *the classroom*. The aim of social integration represents no real challenge for contemporary practitioners and policy makers, especially when compared to the notion of politics offered by Castoriadis. Its adaptive and integrative character makes the definition applicable in almost any kind of non-authoritarian settings. Thus, *pace* Dewey—or rather: those who use Dewey in an uncritical, ahistorical way—it seems more important to raise the opposite argument of his 1916 statement: Democracy is *more* than a conjoint experience, *more* than a mode of associated living; it is *also a form of government*.

Conceptions of democracy as social integration are strongly present in the international literature on citizenship education, identified in several studies (Biesta 2011; Børhaug 2004; Pérez Expósito 2014; Straume 2010). Kjetil Børhaug, for example, finds a "strong, perhaps dominant tradition that fails to discriminate between education for democracy related to the government and democracy related to other social institutions such as work life, church, local community and so forth" (Børhaug 2004, p. 207).<sup>10</sup> The literature on citizenship often defines democracy, vaguely, as "living in society" or "living together". Accordingly, Børhaug tells us, teachers "tend to minimise teaching about political life, and instead focus on how to live together in class and at school in a respectful, tolerant way" (Børhaug 2005, p. 55).

Due to these trends, citizenship literature has been criticised for its tendency to overlook the inherently agonal nature of politics (see, e.g., Ruitenberg 2010a, b; Stitzlein 2011). This critique, sometimes with referral to Mouffe (who in turn is inspired by Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism), maintains that contestation, conflict and disagreement are constituents of the political field,<sup>11</sup> and as such, we cannot, nor should we seek to overcome or dissolve these dimensions.

<sup>10</sup> A key concept in this context is *participation*, where different forms of participation are treated as so many manifestations of 'democracy'. As pointed out by Pérez Expósito, the result of mixing together different conceptions of participation in one and the same theory—as in most theories of citizenship education—is a muddled, apolitical conception of democracy (Pérez Expósito 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Confer footnote 5.

Pérez Expósito (2014, p. 230) sums up the international literature on citizenship education as “depoliticised”, with “ill defined” relationships between concepts and a “frail theoretical foundation”. Political forms of participation are demoted and/or replaced with less controversial categories such as “civic engagement”, which can mean almost everything—except subversive or critical forms of practice. “Such participation”, Pérez Expósito argues, is “predicated on moral and altruistic motivation, rather than [students’] awareness of their position within a political relation” (ibid.). It would be unfair, however, only to point to Dewey’s conception of democracy to account for this tendency. Equally important are more contemporary forms of political liberalism, and the questions they address, to which we now turn.<sup>12</sup>

## A System for Handling Cultural Differences

Contemporary discussions about citizenship education and education for democracy are often framed by Anglo-American debates in general and political liberalism in particular. As my example, I choose political theorist Amy Gutmann. The title of her key work, *Democratic Education* (Gutmann 1987/Gutmann 1999) indicates her Deweyan influence, but even more important is probably the political philosophy of John Rawls.<sup>13</sup> A few words on Rawls’s thought are, therefore, in place.

A central aim for Rawls’ political theory (1993/2005) is to develop principles for handling differences in culturally diverse societies. These principles are meant to be fair and justifiable, so that everyone (who acts reasonably) can endorse them, even though their opinions and beliefs (their conceptions of ‘the good’) can and will differ. The pluralism that characterises modern societies—in terms of culture, life views and beliefs, such as religion—is a key concern in contemporary political liberalism, and, for Rawls, a potential threat to a stable and cohesive polity. In Rawls’ words: “how is it possible that there can be a stable and just society whose free and equal citizens are deeply divided by conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?” (Rawls 2005, p. 134 [lecture IV]). Under these circumstances, debate and disagreement are unavoidable. However, in contrast to political thinkers such as Arendt, Castoriadis, Habermas and Mouffe, Rawls does not see political debate as a politically constitutive factor. For this reason, Habermas (1995) has accused Rawls of wanting to skip the democratic process and turn straight to philosophy, instead of working out the contested issues through deliberation and arguments, something for Habermas would also mean that the results would become legitimate.

Rawls also acknowledges limits as to what could be counted as politically legitimate, but for him, this is a question of principles. For Rawls, the *principles* appealed to in public affairs must be accepted as reasonable for everyone (potentially) concerned. When public matters are debated, it is therefore only legitimate for citizens to appeal to a *public* conception of justice as opposed to other forms, such as “the whole truth as they see it” (Rawls 2005, p. 216). This is because, for Rawls, it is only legitimate to base political decisions on political grounds or reasons, which for him are expressions of “public reason”.

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<sup>12</sup> Political processes and policy reforms are of course extremely important as well, but beyond the scope of the present discussion.

<sup>13</sup> Gutmann also acknowledges the deliberative democracy of Jürgen Habermas.

For Rawls, the exercise of public reason—a key component in a liberal democracy—always means to exercise power over one another (individually or as groups). Thus a central question is what makes this power legitimate and reasonable:

[W]hen may citizens by their vote properly exercise their coercive political power over one another when fundamental questions are at stake? Or in light of what principles and ideals must we exercise that power if our doing so is to be justifiable to others as free and equal? To this question political liberalism replies: our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational. This is the liberal principle of legitimacy (Rawls 2005, p. 217).

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls deduces such constitutional essentials, and finds that proper topics for the exercise of public reason are fundamental questions such as: “... who has the right to vote, or what religions are to be tolerated, or who is to be assured fair equality of opportunity, or to hold property. These and similar questions are the special subject of public reason” (Rawls 2005, p. 214). Much of the thinking on democracy and education inspired by Rawls is characterized by this type of questioning, i.e. who should decide on the contents of school curricula; whose views should be heard and represented, and more specifically for our discussion, who should decide over education. As phrased by Amy Gutmann: “The central question posed by democratic education is: Who should have the authority to shape the education of future citizens?” (Gutmann 1999, p. 16).

The ‘who-question’ here reflects the existing situation, with a political party system accompanied and challenged by strong groups in civil society. In the USA especially, many interest groups either have or want influence over the contents, aims and organization of schools (public and private).<sup>14</sup> Other groups have created their own school with their own curriculum, such as the Amish. A central aim for political liberalism is to develop ideas and principles that all citizens, when acting reasonably, may endorse even though their deeper sets of beliefs differ.

In order to secure a democratic basis for the public system of education, Gutmann distinguishes between moral (i.e. private) and political (public) questions in line with Rawls’s conception of public reason. “Democratic” for Gutmann means to adhere to only strictly political/public, and therefore legitimate, principles (Gutmann 1999; Böyum 2008). Nevertheless, the political principles of liberalism are not without political presuppositions; they are based on specific conceptions about human nature (Papastephanou 2008) and on normative assumptions about the relationship between the individual, the society and the state (Wolin 2004). By black-boxing these questions, liberals such as Rawls are not willing to question the institution of society as a whole, but limit the room of questioning to predetermined “fundamentals”. However, in all fairness, radical political change was never a stated aim in political liberalism. The guiding question in *Democratic Education* is who—or more precisely, whose interests—should be allowed to decide over the contents, aims and nature of education. The objective of the theory is to develop just, institutional relations between different groups in society. Deeper questions about, e.g., what counts as legitimate grounds for decision-making are not really up for dispute since this has already been worked out philosophically. Other, more difficult *political* questions—in the sense of politics proper—, such as what type of society is desirable (e.g., neoliberal capitalism,

<sup>14</sup> A pregnant example is the creationist movement, claiming that the theory of evolution is just another belief system that should be taught as such. Climate change deniers represent another example.



socialism or something else), are not part of the analysis. In fact, Gutmann warns us that the access to influence education must be limited, in order that citizens do not destroy the foundations of liberal democracy itself:

A democratic theory of education recognizes the importance of empowering citizens to make educational policy and also of constraining their choices among policies in accordance with those principles—of nonrepression and nondiscrimination—that preserve the intellectual and social foundations of democratic deliberations. A society that empowers citizens to make educational policy, moderated by these two principled constraints, realizes the democratic ideal of education (Gutmann 1999, p. 14).

From an educational viewpoint, it is interesting to see how Gutmann comes close to identifying a society's degree of democracy with its concern for (public) education, which in turn means its own reproduction:

A democratic theory of education focuses on what might be called 'conscious social reproduction'—the ways in which citizens are or should be empowered to influence the education that in turn shapes the political values, attitudes, and modes of behavior of future citizens (Gutmann 1999, p. 14).

The primary basis for 'conscious social reproduction', according to Gutmann, is the citizens' capacity for deliberation, which should be fostered through education (p. 46). Again, this is not a theory aimed at political change and creation, nor any deeper kind of questioning of the existing power structures ('politics proper'), but rather, a theory aimed at reproducing a specific political system ('the political'). In this respect, we may ask whether it is a political theory at all, or rather a theory for social integration.<sup>15</sup>

However, the significance of political liberalism is easier to see when we turn to concrete examples and political debates. Over the past decades, political liberals have been especially active in discussions about citizenship. The reasons for this are not only theoretical, but arise from political disputes connected to, e.g., the school system. Educational theorists Ravitch and Viteritts have put the problem of citizenship in the clearest terms possible. They state that the US public school system has played a historical role in a "principal purveyor of deeply cherished democratic values" such as "patriotism" and "freedom" (Ravitch and Viteritts 2001, p. 5). During the 1980s and 90s, however, public schools "relinquished their historic role as agencies of civic assimilation", turning instead into "an agency for sponsoring racial, ethnic, and cultural identity" that encouraged students to "identify with race or their ethnic or cultural origins rather than with the overarching civic ideals of the American community" (ibid.). A further concern for Ravitch and Viteritts is the fact that many citizens—that is, voters—do not know the basics of the political system, meaning that they are not sufficiently informed to judge the consequences of their votes. This, they argue, is partly a consequence of identity politics—especially religious irrationalism—and partly due to academic trends. Schools, on their part, have not

... done a very effective job at instilling and nourishing the values that form a disposition toward responsible citizenship. Educators have avoided taking up

<sup>15</sup> In her analysis of citizenship theory, Papastephanou criticizes Rawlsian political liberalism and even draws the conclusion that: "... the Rawlsian conception of education would produce an institutional apparatus for the perpetuation of inequality, unconscious of its role in social reproduction [...] So the educational dilemma is either to cling to liberalism or to contribute to its reformulation" (Papastephanou 2008, p. 48).

controversial moral questions in the classroom for fear that they will offend the sensibilities of one group or another [...]. This reluctance echoes the recently fashionable idea that everything is relative, simply a matter of preference, and that truth is a social construct, existing only in the eyes of the beholder (Ravitch and Viterittis 2001, p. 6).

According to Ravitch and Viterittis, the rise of identity politics at the cost of political liberalism has led to a decline in political (or civic) responsibility and commitment to the common weal. In their analysis, then, identity politics is a threat to citizenship.

Despite the important questions raised by Ravitch and Viterittis—questions that pertain to the *what* of politics—ongoing discussions about citizenship are typically oriented around the *who*-question, such as alternative *identities*, e.g., cultural or ethnic identities versus a national identity, or the cosmopolitan identity of a citizen of the world.<sup>16</sup> In this landscape, political liberalism assumes that there can be a neutral—liberal—position that escapes the particularism and comprehensiveness of its alternatives, an assumption that critics find ill-founded, and even politically deceitful. In the words of Papastephanou: “Organizing citizenship education in a political liberalist fashion [...] enervates the critical and social-reforming potential of pedagogy. It [citizenship education] becomes ethnocentric in presenting liberalist convictions as true descriptions of the human nature” (Papastephanou 2008, p. 51).

Even though political liberals and communitarians were main adversaries during the 1980s and 90s, there was a surprisingly strong overlap in what they saw to be the main locus of contestation, namely the questions of *whose values should prevail* in, e.g., education. By making values, life-views and culture main themes for political thought—rather than, e.g., socioeconomic issues—*identity* became a main category of political discussions and analyses.<sup>17</sup> The risk in this connection is that ‘democracy’ is reduced to a social system with an abundance of participation, yet little going on in terms of political creation.

Again, there are critical voices that speak against the rather static conception of democracy held by Gutmann and others. The aforementioned critique inspired by the poststructuralist thought of Mouffe and Rancière, emphasizing the importance of dissent and agonism in a sound democracy, is well targeted in this connection (see, e.g., Ruitenberg 2010a, b; Stitzlein 2011). Another critical voice belongs to Gert Biesta, whose contributions to the field deserve our attention, not least since he has provided his own, explicit definitions of the concepts under consideration.

## Democracy as Subjectification

In *Learning democracy in school and society*, Biesta (2011) analyses contemporary policies for citizenship education, and finds a dominant preoccupation with the teaching of certain skills, competencies and qualifications,<sup>18</sup> combined with a strong tendency to

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Gutmann’s next major work was called *Identity in Democracy*.

<sup>17</sup> Questions about inclusion, exclusion etc. based on the category of identity are of course far from unimportant, but compared to the debates of the 1970s, attention to economic structures and political causes are curiously lacking. A similar concern, which is also not discussed here, is the conflation of politics and (legal and political) *rights* (see the works of Chantal Mouffe 2005, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> The terms vary slightly: in earlier policy literature it was knowledge, skills and values or attitudes, whereas competencies now seems to have taken the place of the latter.

conceptualise democracy in terms of social integration. Both are deemed inadequate in terms of their political potential. Biesta is also concerned about the near-dominant tendency in European policy discourse to cast the idea of lifelong learning in economic terms—a trend he and others call *the learning economy*. This conception, he argues, threatens the understanding of “democracy as a learning society”: a society that is able and willing to learn about itself (Biesta 2011, p. 70). The discourse of learning economy, in contrast, is individualistic, aimed at individual’s plight to manage their “learning trajectories” in order to be adaptable to the shifting demands of the global economy. This kind of individual monitors and manages him/herself by improving their skills and competencies (see also Masschelein and Simons 2002, 2008). In line with the Lisbon treaty, Biesta observes, this type of individual is described in terms of *citizenship*: that is, a bearer of certain competences, but basically uncritical toward the powers that shape the social structures.

In Biesta’s analysis, the learning economy has influenced conceptions of citizenship and civic education— notions connected to education for democracy—at the cost of the political meaning of democracy. In the learning economy, ‘democracy’ means adaptation to a social structure whose components, individuals, are successfully integrated in the social order. Biesta rightly argues that this conception of citizenship is far removed from a political notion of democracy.<sup>19</sup> I also agree that when individuals are posited as the starting point and key component of democracy, the political dimension of ‘politics proper’ falls out of sight. As Biesta points out, quoting Zygmunt Bauman, what is needed is a public sphere, where private troubles can be congealed into public interests (Biesta 2011, p. 70). Biesta has studied European Union policy programmes in higher education, universities, adult education and lifelong learning and found “a strong tendency to focus the discussion on individuals and their responsibilities and [to] see democracy more in terms of consensus and sameness than in terms of contestation and difference” (Biesta 2011, p. 85). This is what Biesta denotes as a “socialisation” conception of democracy and civic learning. In a similar analysis, he also distinguishes between citizenship as a “social identity” vis-à-vis a “political” one (Biesta 2013). The point is that, from a political point of view, the social/socialisation conception does not provide a proper connection between private and public concerns, nor does it challenge the existing socio-political order. In its place, Biesta wants to promote an understanding of citizenship that is:

... more political than social, more concerned about collective than individual learning, that acknowledges the role of conflict and contestation, and that is less aimed at integration and reproduction of the existing order but also allows for forms of agency that question the particular construction of the political order (Biesta 2011, p. 44).

This point is underscored by the need to acknowledge “that the social and the political understanding of citizenship are not the same”, and should not be conflated (Biesta 2013, p. 2). He also stresses the need to “acknowledge the political ‘foundation’ of democratic politics” (Biesta 2010, p. 556). Clearly, Biesta sees the need for politics, in the strong and explicit sense of ‘politics proper’, in educational thought. However, before we turn to his alternative, *subjectification*, let us see how he conceptualizes democracy in relation to politics.

For Biesta, “[d]emocracy, in its shortest formula, is about learning from difference and learning to live with others who are not like us. For this very reason democracy can only be

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<sup>19</sup> I have made a similar analysis in Straume(2010).

learned *from* life” (Biesta 2011, p. 70). It is of course tempting to comment the fact that Biesta talks about democracy primarily in terms of learning, and not, e.g., in terms of autonomy or self-institution (Castoriadis), decision making or deliberation (Habermas, Rawls) or struggles over power (Mouffe). This is quite remarkable for someone who is renowned for his convincing criticism of ‘learning society’ in works such as “Against Learning” (Biesta 2005) and *Beyond Learning* (2006). But more to the point, I want to argue that Biesta’s conception of democracy as “learning to live with others who are not like us” is still, despite his declared intentions to the opposite, a social conception of democracy. I say this because there is nothing political in the definition, such as political causes (the ‘what’ of politics) or the notion of questioning the existing powers. In fact, living together with our differences is something that can be done in a society where politics has *not* been instituted, such as a technocracy or a “benevolent” tyranny in the spirit of “Brave New World”. Biesta’s definition brings the thoughts to community life, or life in the classroom, more than to a political democracy such as the assembly of the Greeks. In this respect, Biesta comes close to Dewey’s arguably prepolitical conception of democracy as “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint associated experience”. In fact, in 2006/2007, Biesta himself endorses a social conception of democracy for the following reasons:

... a *social* conception of democracy acknowledges that democracy is not exclusively about collective decision making in the political domain, but that it has to do with participation in the “construction, maintenance and transformation” of social and political life more generally [...]. A social conception of democracy expresses, in other words, that democracy is about inclusive ways of social and political action (Biesta 2007, p. 4).<sup>20</sup>

However, the main point for Biesta concerns subjectivity or *subjectification*, a notion he constructs from rather different sources. In an article from 2003, Biesta criticizes the idea that the task of education would be to work out programmes for educating citizens in accordance with the needs of theorists, something which would make educationists into handmaidens for political philosophy. Instead, he proposes to view democracy as an educational problem in its own right, where the main purpose for democratic education would be to support, or call forth, subjectivity (Biesta 2003, p. 64). On this background, he proposes the following “educational definition” of democracy: “Democracy is the situation in which all human beings can become subjects”, which means “to create a situation where all have the same right to participate, and are equally entitled to be heard in questions of common interest” (Biesta 2003, p. 65). Accordingly, democratic subjectivity is formed through participation in democratic activities, inside and outside of educational institutions. By emphasising a social conception of democracy, Biesta (2007) claims to have captured a “democratic intention”, thus widening what he sees as a narrow conception of democracy (democracy as a form of government and collective decision making), with explicit reference to Dewey. He thereby succeeds in criticizing instrumentalism in educational policy.<sup>21</sup> However, in my view, this is achieved at the cost of democracy as a political form of rule, i.e. self-government. The question that begs itself is whether the bringing forth of subjects is a more central task for democracy than to create institutions.

<sup>20</sup> Also printed in Biesta (2006), p. 122–123.

<sup>21</sup> I am not talking here about Deweyan instrumentalism.

In Biesta's analysis, however, there is an inherent relationship between subjectivity and democratic politics that still needs to be elaborated. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, he states that "[t]he formation and ongoing transformation of political subjectivities ... is what democratic politics is about" (Biesta 2011, p. 97). The background for both these thinkers, in Biesta's rendering, is that political activity first and foremost is about the constitution of a political order, but that this kind of order never can be permanently established in a democracy. "Democracy" is something that per definition escapes every attempt at (particular or universal) definition, or better: determination. A key question concerning the establishment of a political order is *who*—what kind of whos—constitutes this order. With reference to Rancière, Biesta notes that "[s]ubjectification is about the ... 'coming into presence' ... of a way of being that had no place in the existing order of things. Subjectification is therefore a *supplement* to the existing order because it adds something to this order, and precisely for this reason the supplement also *divides* the existing order ..." (Biesta 2011, p. 95). Through an analysis of *parts* and *non-parts*, those who count and those who are not counted, Rancière's notion of democracy can be seen as an ordering/reordering of *whos*. In Biesta's rendering, the analysis offers two alternative identities for citizens: either as individuals socialized into the preexisting social order or as subjectivities who make themselves existent as political events.

Following Hannah Arendt, Biesta argues that students (or people in general) become subjects through beginning and taking part in *action*: chains of events that are unforeseeable in nature, set in motion by the "words and deeds" of individuals, thus allowing everyone to reveal "who s/he is" (Biesta 2010, 2011).<sup>22</sup> His notion of subjectification combines the notion of plurality and being-together-in-difference with the idea of positing oneself as political subjectivity on the presupposition of equality. As mentioned above, the wider framework of Biesta's analysis is the logic of political order. The connection between the (desirable) notion of plurality and a destabilised (or elusive) notion of democracy is expressed in the following: "In the political understanding of citizenship [as opposed to the social understanding], plurality and difference are seen as the very *raison d'être* of democratic processes and practices and therefore as what needs to be protected and cultivated" (Biesta 2013, p. 2). *Pace* the European policy approach to citizenship, he argues that democracy is not a ready-made system, which, once it has been instituted only needs to educate citizens into its fold.

Again, I agree that socialization and teaching of certain skills, competencies, knowledge and dispositions are not sufficient to create democracy—and even less so, a political democracy. I also support the need to "acknowledge the political 'foundation' of democratic politics" (Biesta 2010, p. 556). However, in my view, Biesta fails to demonstrate what is political about his concept of subjectification.<sup>23</sup> What I find missing are the political causes, that which makes a *demos* constitute itself—or in other terms, that which makes people take to the streets, to look beyond themselves, and even, at times, to give their life for the sake of politics. I therefore question whether Biesta has succeeded in formulating a *political* conception of democracy and education, and also, to what degree his conception really differs from the other conceptions discussed in the above. Like the political liberal–communitarian debate and identity politics, Biesta's attention is mainly on

<sup>22</sup> Rancière, on the other hand, approaches the notion of subjectivity through the category of equality, which he sees as a presupposition in all politico-social affairs, and for democracy in particular (Rancière 2006).

<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Pérez Expósito (2014) has brought a thorough criticism of depoliticising trends in citizenship education and set forth a politicised alternative with various examples of how students can be politically active in a school setting.

the *who* of politics. When discussing how politics can be conceptualized as *more political* (Biesta 2010), his answer is subjectification. But politics is also about a ‘what’, and I would even suggest that the *what* of politics is what makes it political, or better: politicised.<sup>24</sup>

Even though Biesta cherishes plurality, difference, and political contestation, the notion of political *causes* are not part of his conception of a political democracy. Nor does his definition(s) refer to political creation, such as the making of laws and institutions, or discussions about what society could look like. However, at this point I must hasten to say that I do not mean that Biesta is an apolitical thinker: In my opinion, his diagnostic works are splendid examples of *politics* as questioning of existing power structures, for example his critique of the marketisation of Western societies, brilliantly captured in phrases like ‘the new language of learning’ and ‘the learning economy’ (Biesta 2005, 2006). It is his theoretical answers that I find deficient, not his analyses or praxis.

## Toward a Political Conception of Democracy in Education

A theme that seems to unite Gutmann, Rawls and Biesta is what I have called the who-question: Whose arguments should be heard and on what basis, and accordingly, what is the democratic order and who are part of it? In education, this translates to, e.g., who should have a say over (public) education, and how to address problems like marginalization and exclusion from political processes. My own view is that, in order to describe democratic politics, notions of identity and subjectivity are important, yet they represent just one side of the matter, and as I have argued, not the most important one. What I miss in the three positions analysed above are concepts that characterize a political society—beyond the who-question and the question of order/structure/inclusion—such as political causes and descriptions of a society that rules itself. Such a society (in fact, every society) is characterised first and foremost by its *institutions*—in the widest sense of the term—and the significations they embody (Castoriadis 1987). What we need to realise—in accordance with the project of autonomy—is that the creation and recreation of these institutions are our own responsibility.

My fear is that if we concentrate only upon the *who* and the *how* of politics, we risk taking the instituted political order for granted. The ‘what’ of politics is so important because to think and act politically means to realize that our common world is a created world, consisting of what Castoriadis (1987) called social imaginary significations, that is, significations that have no ‘ground’ in the natural world. To fully realize this, means to see ourselves as responsible for our creations, and also for changing and recreating our social institutions: the laws, norms and customs that regulate our life together. In other words, politics is about that which separates and at the same time binds us together, our common affairs, here wonderfully described by Arendt:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak (Arendt 1989, p. 52).

<sup>24</sup> Some contemporary examples would be injustice, poverty, wars, climate injustice, and a growing, neoliberal plutocracy.

In this *worldly* perspective, notions of living together or “bearing with each other” (Biesta 2010) are still prepolitical notions—they are elements in, but not the essence of democratic politics. To become engaged in politics, we must be able to focus our attention on the world, not only on ourselves, and the things, ideas and institutions that are *between* and *around* us. As pointed out by Ruitenberg (2010a, p. 52), engaging students in difficult and sometimes emotionally upsetting social facts—politically “charged” events—is also a way of identifying oneself as political subjects, individually and collectively.

One may of course ask how deep the problem really goes, and whether my concerns are overblown. After all, we are talking about educational theories and not political ones. From one perspective, it is true that the role of schools is to reproduce societies, and not destabilise or upset them. But there is also a deeper meaning of politics that motivates my analysis, one that is not primarily concerned with questions such as integration versus conflict, inclusion versus marginalisation or deliberation versus dissent. To elucidate this deeper meaning, we may again turn to Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis. As Arendt saw it, the danger in conflating the political with the social was to risk losing sight of—or simply lose—‘politics proper’. One obvious problem is that, if everything is seen to be political, nothing is. But more importantly for Arendt (1989), and for Castoriadis (1991a, b), is that a society that has not instituted politics is a society without freedom. The public-political sphere is the sphere of freedom where individuals can not only come forth and show who they are, through words and deeds (Arendt and Biesta), it is also the place where society questions itself with respect to its being-society (Castoriadis), and where the collective asks itself: are these the laws that we ought to have? Are they fair and just? If not, what would be a fair and just law? And in extension of this, Castoriadis adds, what is justice? (Castoriadis 1991a). In a democracy, all such ‘what-questions’ should be up for debate, by students and teachers, citizens and non-citizens, and not determined in advance by philosophers.

For Castoriadis, the nature of politics in the project of autonomy is freedom—not to do just anything, but to create and to question the laws and limitations that we have laid upon ourselves as a democracy. Questioning, creation and responsibility go hand in hand in a political democracy, because to question in a deep way means to take responsibility for (re-)creating. And for these reasons, democracy is also a tragic regime, where no limits exist except those we set for ourselves. In Castoriadis’s words: “In a democracy, people *can* do anything—and must know that they *ought not* to do just anything” (Castoriadis 1991a, p. 115). Such, and no less, are the conditions for education in a democracy.

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