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# I. Schooling, Inequality, and Commitment to the Public Good

## Chapter 1

### The Idea of a Public Education

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#### INTRODUCTION: THE PUBLIC ROLE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

In everyday language, whether a school is described as “public” or not is determined by the way it is funded and by who is allowed to attend it (Callan, 2004). Ideally however, a *public* school should also be defined and evaluated by its unique goal—to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with others about their shared interests and common fate. Yet just what does it mean to renew a public and to engage one another? How is this engagement to take place, and what might it mean in a highly specialized class conscious, gendered, and racialized society to have shared interests or a common fate? Is there even such a thing as a public or is it simply a shorthand way to indicate a lot of individual people, each with their own interests and ideas who may happen to intersect and come together in a temporary way and on some issues? And, if the *public* is only a collective term for a lot of individuals, then can there really be anything unique about an education that is called “public”? And what does “engagement” mean? War is an “engagement” as much as a calm living room conversation. These questions motivate the debate over education today, and uncertainty about the answers fuels the desire to “privatize” education. The first task of this chapter then is to get some purchase on the idea of a public and to see how it can be applied to education.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF THE PUBLIC

The idea of a public can be traced back to the Greek “Agora” where citizens would come to exchange both goods and ideas and where matters of state might be deliberated. Exchange is the central idea here, but the exchange is not only between a single

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seller and a single buyer, the image that dominates classical capitalism, for example. Rather, the image here is of a horizontal exchange among equals, doing many things at once, and where political discussion was a part of an everyday life. Selling and purchasing took place in the Agora, but so did playing, teaching and learning, arguing, philosophizing, and so on. And even though the citizenry comprised only a segment of the population, excluding women and slaves, the fact that the exchange was horizontal and brought many activities into the open meant that much identity work was being done as goods were exchanged. Athenians learned to be Athenians in the context of growing up in and participating in the Agora (of course, those who were not citizens also learned how to behave appropriately in a public place that was not exactly their own; Jaeger, 1939/1967, p. 140). It was here that the stories of Homer, of the past wars, and of the present threats were passed on, and it was here as well that children first learned of the Greek Gods and their quarrelsome and capricious nature.

Deliberation was certainly a part of this cacophony of activity; the Agora gave rise to the idea of an interest beyond that of the individual. Jaeger (1939/1967) describes the development of this interest as Solon (the ancient statesman and legislator) “warns his fellow-citizens against wearing themselves out in the blind and furious conflict of interest” (p. 140). Self-interest, class warfare, and civil strife are the evils that tear a city apart (Jaeger, 1939/1967, p. 141), and Solon understood the need for an impartial body of law that would govern life and to which all citizens would have an allegiance. This idea of allegiance to an impartial body of law also provided a proposed public identity, an ideal, to shape an Athenian citizen, however imperfectly this may have been accomplished. This ideal is best expressed in Plato’s (1986) *Apology* (pp. 3–26) and *Crito* (pp. 27–43) where Socrates appeals to the impartiality of reason to refute the charge of treason levied against him and then accepts his sentence as the will, however mistaken, of the city that has raised him. Public ascent to the governing laws of society as a sphere above partisan private interests was an important factor in the subsequent philosophical conversations that took place in Greece. For if there was something to the idea that the polis had a public foundation that was more than mere force in the service of the most powerful, then that foundation had itself to be public and available to all citizens (Plato, 1945/1964). For a Greek philosopher such as Plato, that foundation was a commitment to rational deliberation.

For Plato, and Aristotle, it was the ability to understand and engage in the reasoning process that made one fit to rule, and this was not available to everyone. Reason and democracy were not coupled. Rather, democracy was the product of desire and was practiced by a collection of individuals. Reason was the process of reflection, a process through which a public was created. Reason, then, was public in a very limited sense. It was not available for all to comprehend, but for the few who were sufficiently insightful to comprehend, it could lead to an appropriate public life. The conclusions of reason were public when they were developed in the context of responses to all alternatives and addressed all reasonable counterarguments.

For Aristotle to appreciate the public nature of reason, one must first locate it properly. Whereas Plato sought a politics that would be as rational and as precise

as mathematics, Aristotle understood that the standard of reason must be different in ethics (1953/1956) and politics (1948/1957) than in mathematics. Ethics like politics is not the precise kind of science as is mathematics, and to get it right one needs to recognize this difference. Aristotle understood in a way that Plato seemed not to that there is a human element involved in public deliberation about politics and ethics. Human interest is mixed with human reason. However, that element has the same basic interest as Solon had established: to dissolve potentially destructive conflicts and enable the right sort of people—those not burdened by private concerns and interests—to come together in a dispassionate way to deliberate about the most preferred course of action. Given that the majority of the people in Athens were women or slaves or both, this still meant that the role of deliberator was an exclusive one, one reserved only for the free males who were citizens.

Nevertheless, Aristotle rejected Plato's view that the role of education was to create political unity, by promoting the acceptance of a hierarchy of virtues with justice at the top. Instead, he saw the significance of diversity within harmony. He wrote,

It is true that unity is to some extent necessary . . . but total unity is not. There is a point at which a polis by advancing unity will cease to be a polis: There is another point, short of that, at which it may still remain a polis, but will none the less come nearer to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse polis. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. (Aristotle, 1948/1957, p. 51)

For Aristotle, a *public* school, one under the control of the legislator, although not open to everyone, was the instrument for preparing students for a public role.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to casual contemporary usage, for Aristotle (1948/1957) a school was public because (a) it promoted public virtues, and especially reason; (b) it prepared students for life in a public; and (c) it was controlled by a public body. A public education provided students with the disinterested dispositions and deliberative skills to engage in rational discussions about the overall well-being of the polis.

Two ingredients dominated the Greek idea of a public education. First was the development of what Aristotle called the rational faculty, and second was a shared identity in the construction of a public good. Hence the importance of friendship among equals for Aristotle's legislators, a friendship that they began to develop through the mediation of public education. Some centuries later, indeed at an unlikely historical moment, the Roman Cicero challenged Aristotle's doctrine of the exclusiveness of reason arguing that all men are equal in terms of their possession of reason (Sabine, 1958, p. 164) and that "the state and its law is the common property of its people" (p. 166), allowing that the people as a whole are a collective body with "a self-governing organization which has necessarily the power to preserve itself" (p. 166).

### THE ECLIPSE OF THE PUBLIC AS A MORAL REALITY

Two features of Aristotle's idea of a public need to be highlighted. The first is that as a deliberative body seeking to advance a common good, the public has a

reality that is more than the sum of the individuals who compose it. The second is that a public refers to a process of rational deliberation about a common fate. The Reformation and, more important, certain interpretations of early capitalism served to eclipse both of these. Although Aristotle held that a public has a moral status and a reality in its own right, both of these movements stressed the exclusive reality of the individual, one as the agent of conscience and goodness, the other as the agent of desires and freedom. For both, individual authenticity was elevated over rational and collaborative deliberation as an ideal (Taylor, 1992).

Moreover, Aristotle's idea of a public concerned a shared identity—membership in a polis—as well as a shared fate. Only citizens could be members of this public, not only because only citizens were capable of reasoning but also because only citizens were conscious of a shared identity, and only they were able to put private interest aside in deliberating about a course of collective action. The idea of the subordination of private interests to some larger public interest was eclipsed as the evolution of laissez-faire capitalism placed all desire on a common plain where the market would determine their worth (Satz, 2010).

A critical difference between Aristotle's (and Cicero's) notion of the public and liberalism's idea of self-government involves the place of desire, and reflection. For the liberal, desire is the motive for action. For Aristotle, desire was not the motive for action but the cause for and the initiator of reflection. As an individual, I of course have desires, and in the private sphere it is quite natural, according to Aristotle, to act on them. However, for Aristotle, the public sphere serves as a check on individual desires and evokes mutual reflection and a concern to harmonize the desires of different individuals and to harness them in a communal effort to define and achieve a common good.

For Aristotle, what and how I desire in private may well influence my capacity to reflect on these desires in public. Hence the need for an education that stresses restraint and friendship “as the pursuit of a common social life” (Aristotle, 1948/1957, p. 139). The aim of a good society is to shape desire in ways that enable a social good to emerge. Aristotle thus warns that “the masses become revolutionary when the distribution of property is unequal” (1948/1957, p. 79). Certainly not himself a revolutionary, he quickly adds that educated men become revolutionary when “the distribution of office is equal” (p. 79). The point, however, is that for Aristotle, the reflection and control of individual desire is a condition and an aim of public life.

This is not so for the laissez-faire liberal. Indeed, outside of the initial moment when a political society is formed, the conception of a public, as a deliberative body seeking a common good, is eclipsed. In its place is a strong notion of majority rule, tempered by the idea of minority rights. There are exceptions to this picture. In America, Jefferson's plan for the formation of the University of Virginia is an important historical attempt to reintroduce some of the deliberative function of an Agora into American education. Here engagement and deliberation were incorporated even into his architectural scheme for university housing (T. Jefferson, personal correspondence to L. W. Tazewell, January 5, 1805).

Rousseau's idea of the General Will is the most influential exception (Rousseau, 1762/1957). Although there are many contradictions in Rousseau's account of what this Will is, he tries to maintain the remnant of a deliberative body where individual desires are filtered through a stronger concern for the common good. As Delaney (2005) points out,

Rousseau argues that there is an important distinction to be made between the General Will and the collection of individual wills: "There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the General Will. The latter looks only to the common interest; the former considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills. But take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the General Will."

Delaney (2005) points out that Rousseau can be understood in an almost Rawlsian (Rawls) sense—namely, that if the citizens were ignorant of the subgroups to which they belong, they would inevitably make decisions that would be to the advantage of the society as a whole, and thus be in accordance with the General Will.

Although scholars debate whether Rousseau ever did envisage a true deliberative process, what is significant is that the distinction he makes between the General Will and the will of all, the one seeking the common good and the other adding up the sum of private wills, is the distinction between Aristotle and classical liberalism. The liberalism of Hobbes, Locke, and Adam Smith renders the very idea of a common good invisible, and rendering it invisible renders it out of existence. Rousseau wants to again make it visible, and by making it visible—that is, by making it a goal of personal deliberation—he hopes to bring it back into existence.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of a common good when made the object of deliberation is the idea that Aristotle was seeking in his notion of a public. Yet once Locke entered the picture, expressing the right of the governed to pass judgment on those who govern them, and to do so in terms of their own personal, unreflective desires, the public could no longer be the same. Rousseau likely understood this, but because his General Will straddles both a deliberative and an absolute conception of the good, he never quite came to grips with it. What he did manage to do, however, was to make visible again the possibility of a public, and by making that idea visible in an age when democracy was on the rise, he set the stage for the political and the educational debates that were to soon follow in the works of Kant, Hegel, and Marx and, across the sea, in those of Jefferson and later Dewey.

### DEWEY AND THE PUBLIC

Of course, for modern American educators Dewey is the key figure, and some believe that by emphasizing the process of inquiry he actually resolved the issue between a system that promotes the will of all and one that advances the idea of a true public, where private interest is put aside for the sake of discovering and advancing a common good. But arguably one of the interesting features of Dewey's *educational* philosophy is that in his major educational works, he failed to examine the idea of

*educating a public*, leaving the impression that a public is reducible to its individual members. Indeed, his definition of a public as all of those people affected by the indirect consequences of a direct exchange lends itself to such an impression (Dewey, 1927/1988, pp. 15–16). This might be seen as simply an oversight since Dewey opposed rugged individualism of the kind associated with classical laissez-faire capitalism. Yet it is more accurate to see in it the continuing influence of laissez-faire liberalism even on one of its most articulate opponents.

Recall that for the classical laissez-faire liberal, the ontology of the individual meant that only two forms of associations could be acknowledged as legitimate: associations of interests—which included markets and governments—and associations of sentiments—which included families, tribes, and nations. Although Dewey questioned this ontology, his educational philosophy is still influenced by it in the sense that associations of interests and associations of sentiment were both paramount in describing his educational ideal. His ideal school was an association of sentiment, or what he called a community, where true inquiry took place and resulted in cooperative activity. His idea of an education where children would ever expand their associations (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 83) was a vision of individual growth through expanded interests and inquiry. Yet given this vision, what then can we say about a public? Is such public growth possible, or is growth only restricted to individuals in associations of interest? Or is there some other way in which the idea of a public can be conceived, one that is better adapted to modern conditions?

Dewey believed that scientific inquiry would replace Aristotle's notion of reason as the engine of cooperative action, but this belief seems to assume a common standpoint or at least a shared end in view and for some seems overly optimistic. The question then is if this standpoint cannot be assumed, is a public still possible or must we then fall back on the idea that *a public* is simply a term used to describe individual desires in the aggregate. If it is the latter, then is the idea of a public education any more than an excuse for a state monopoly over education to be used to manipulate the masses? In what follows, I argue that the idea of a public education, properly construed, is an important vehicle for civic education in a democracy.

### **A MODERN CONCEPTION OF A PUBLIC: PESSIMISM OR MANIPULATION**

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the few contemporary philosophers who share Aristotle's vision of an *educated* public. MacIntyre holds that a public consists of similarly educated people in close relationship with one another and who share similar ideas and have a mutual concern to advance the common good. Although MacIntyre shares Aristotle's idea of a public, he is pessimistic about the possibility of the formation of a true public in modern times. His pessimism rests on his observations that population increases make small face-to-face encounters of like-minded, public-spirited educated elites unlikely; that economic growth has obscured the significance of contemplation and deliberation; and that the influence of the educated class has diminished whereas the importance of the laboring and owning classes has increased.

He also observes that the dissolution of the educated classes into the professional groups with their own separate interests and perspectives has disrupted the idea of reason as a unifying force (MacIntyre, 1987, 1988). Although pessimistic about the possibility of a modern public MacIntyre is true to Aristotle's idea of a public—a shared identity and agreement about the foundations of rational justification. It is simply that he also believes that postmodern society makes the achievement of these ends impossible. One of the conditions that MacIntyre neglected to include is the rise of mass media and its capacity to manipulate public opinion. Hence, MacIntyre's view, although pessimistic, is also somewhat benign. A public was no longer possible, but whether that made matters better or worse was unsettled.

However, half a century before MacIntyre wrote, Walter Lippmann (1955) expressed grave concern about the way in which public opinion was mobilized to address critical events such as war. Here the problem was not the impossibility of a public formation but the way it had to be overheated for the sake of mobilization. As he explained referring to World War II,

It seemed impossible to wage the war energetically except by inciting the people to paroxysms of hatred and to utopian dreams. So they were told that the Four Freedoms would be established everywhere, once the incurably bad Germans and the incurably bad Japanese had been forced to surrender unconditionally. (Lippmann, 1955, p. 23)

Lippmann's (1955) answer is a return to what he calls a public philosophy, which involves the recognition of "precepts, which restrict and restrain private interests and desire" (p. 114). And he makes it clear that

the public philosophy is addressed to the government of our appetites and passions by the reason of a second civilized and therefore acquired nature. Therefore the public philosophy cannot be popular. For its aims to resist and to regulate those very opinions and desires which are most popular. (p. 162)

For the "common man," [*sic*] reason and transparency may not always be the best means to transmit this philosophy, and Lippmann (1955) allows metaphor, myth, or religious dogma to take the place of reason where necessary. Thus Lippmann replaces MacIntyre's pessimism with a form of manipulative realism, which seems antithetical to democracy but which he feels is needed to protect it. He fails to address the question as to whether what he proposes to protect would, given his means of protection, be truly a "democracy."

MacIntyre and Lippmann fail to address adequately two considerations. The first is that in modern democracies, there is a strong expectation that citizens must be involved. Such involvement is not only a nice political ideal. It is quite essential for meeting the critical problems of our day. From simple recycling programs to the development of alternative forms of energy to combat pollution and global warming, citizen participation is critical, and adequate participation in a noncommand society requires high levels of public understanding. Granted sloganeering and mobilization may also be effective. However, in a democracy these must be redeemable



by sound evidence and reasonable arguments. The second consideration is that the *knowledge* that public opinion is being manipulated weakens the likelihood of public compliance. Since transparency is critical for democracy, this view creates a paradox. Either be transparent and paralyze joint action, or appear to be transparent while manipulating undemocratically public opinion. Hence, both MacIntyre's pessimism and Lippmann's manipulative realism are not just commentary, they also have the effect of weakening the possibility of public democratic will formation. Of course, Lippmann could respond that truly effective manipulation would be invisible, but this response is not only cynical; in an age of instantaneous Internet communication, it is academic and not very fruitful.

### **DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: A CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE**

Most recently MacIntyre's pessimism and Lippmann's manipulative realism have been challenged by the idea of deliberative democracy and the attempt to refine it (Gutmann, 1987; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1971). Here the public sphere becomes an arena for the engagement of differences, and the public becomes a body of strangers so engaged. Dewey (1927/1988) provides the impetus for this movement, and in doing so he begins implicitly to acknowledge the public as more than either a community of interests or sentiments and implicitly would seem to allow that a public as a body can be educated. He writes,

Majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it is never merely majority rule. . . . The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the important thing; antecedent debates, the modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities. . . . The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. (p. 207)

Dewey's (1927/1988) quote with its emphasis on the antecedents of majority rule, including the concern for the opinions of minorities, can be read as a response to Lippmann's paternalistic notion of a public philosophy. Here there is an answer to MacIntyre's pessimism, but the answer is not paternalism. Rather it is the improvement of the conditions for deliberation. As Bohman (1996) puts it, "the deliberative process forces citizens to justify their decisions and opinions by appealing to common interests or by arguing in terms of reasons that 'all could accept' in public debate" (p. 5). Maintaining and improving the conditions for deliberation and debate is an intergenerational task and has implications for the reconstruction of the idea of a public education.

Recently, philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas in Germany, John Rawls in the United States, and others have added to Dewey's concern to improve the "methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion." Habermas's (1971) notion of an ideal speech community provides an idea standard, which can be called into play to evaluate apparent consensus about meaning and action and is critical to his notion of a public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1997) describes it as follows:

The idea of a “public sphere” . . . is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence an institutional arena of discursive interaction. This arena is different from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourse that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas’s sense is also distinct from the official-economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discourse relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. (p. 70)

Habermas believes that these evaluative principles are implicitly assumed by all communicative acts and hence can be called on to advance will formation in the public arena. Habermas’s ideal speech community reflects Aristotle’s notion of deliberation. John Rawls (1993) adds to this with his proposal that public deliberation be governed by what he calls the Burden of Judgment where we work to provide an account of public disagreement that “does not impugn the reasonableness of those who disagree” (p. 55). Habermas has been criticized for ignoring differences of gender, race, and culture, (Fraser, 1997, p. 73) and Rawls for neglecting the way dominance privileges voice. Yet in their defense it could be said that the very idea of dominance and of racial and gender privilege as problematic adds substance to their more abstract formulations (nevertheless, concrete attempts to address this lack can be seen in the works of both educators and political theorists; Freire, 1968; Gilligan, 1982; Mansbridge, 1980). Although Habermas and Rawls work to clarify the meaning of public reason, they both minimize the importance of a shared identity that both Lippmann and MacIntyre found so problematic and that the invention of public education in the United States and Europe was meant to address (B. Anderson, 1983; Feinberg, 1998; Mann, 1957; National Education Association of the United States & Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918). This oversight spells out the task of a theory of public education appropriate for today when pluralism and deep disagreement are acknowledged but the reproduction of a public in terms of identity formation and an education for reasonable deliberation are primary goals.

Yet Aristotle’s model of like-minded, similarly educated equals joined together by friendship and reason is too demanding for contemporary times. If taken without modification, it leads to either MacIntyre’s pessimism or Lippmann’s manipulation. And if taken in parts, reason is separated from identity. Modern life is just too complex and modern democracy just too inclusive to expect that a single rational foundation will be acceptable to all. If public reasoning is handicapped by plurality and plurality retards a common identity, then the idea of a true public school as an education that prepares students for a life in a public requires a reconstructed idea of public education with reformulated notions of identity and reason.

This reconstruction will need to take into account two constraints that Aristotle did not feel compelled to address. One is the migration of rationality from citizen to expert that MacIntyre describes, and the other is the growing plurality and the loss of a public philosophy that concerns Lippmann. It will also need to address the position of liberalism that the *public* is simply a term for the aggregate of individuals

who compose it and does not, as Aristotle thought, have a reality that transcends the sum of individual desires. In the following, I address these concerns through a reexamination of the contemporary restoration of classical liberalism and its argument for school choice. The object of this reexamination is to revive a notion of a public that is more than the aggregate of the desires of the individuals who comprise it at any given moment.

### **FROM NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS TO PUBLIC VALUES: THE PITFALLS OF CHOICE**

In this section, I will examine the major justification for substituting private, parental choice for a larger public good and show why this justification is inadequate. I will do this by reconsidering the idea of a public value, showing that it cannot be reduced to an aggregate of private desires, and then by distinguishing a number of different kinds of values from one another. These will include what economists call neighborhood benefits (Friedman, 1955), which are the goods that one person accrues as a result of advantages that are given directly to another. These are closely related to what I will call shared private values. Both of these are to be distinguished from what I will call common values, which I define here as the shared understandings that generate existing private values preferences. Finally, I distinguish these from public values, which I define as common values regulated by discourse.

The concerns of MacIntyre and Lippmann are relevant in helping see the difficulty in moving from common to public values, but these difficulties do not refute the counterclaim to liberalism that the public has an independent status that includes but is not reducible to the aggregate of individuals that compose it. With this argument in place, I then reconsider the role of education in the construction of a public and show the different levels at which this work can be accomplished. Finally, I address the question of whether a school that reproduces a public needs to be state controlled and supported. Thus, by bringing the idea of a public back into view, I hope to sharpen the mission of a truly public school. I begin with the idea of neighborhood effects.

“Neighborhood effects” is a concept developed by classically minded economists to justify the compulsory transfer of funds from one person to another although claiming that such transfer need not diminish individual freedom or promote government intervention. The concept has been used in education to justify the use of tax funds to support the idea of vouchers that parents can then use to send their child to a school of their choice, whether private, public, or religious. The transfer of your funds for the education of my child is justified in this view, because, at least up to a certain point, the education of my child benefits you. In other words, when my child learns to read the entire community is better off in a number of ways and so it is not an infringement on individual rights to tax members of the community for the education of other people’s children. Given the premises of market capitalism, this then allows for a legitimate transfer of funds from one party to the next and, according to this view, does not violate the basic tenet of classical capitalism, the freedom to

determine how to spend your own money. The “neighborhood” then is shorthand for all the individuals who benefit indirectly from another child’s education. A neighborhood benefit indicates a value that is shared by many, but it is shared by each of them individually.

Over time, however, according to these economists, the benefits of education begin to accrue less to neighborhood and more to the individual just as education becomes less general and more vocational. As this occurs the obligation of the community to support education is reduced, whereas the obligation of the individuals to support their own education increases. However, the basic point is to both justify maximum individual freedom through choice and then explain why it can be legitimate to tax one person to support the educational choice of another. The argument actually fails on a number of accounts; however, the most significant failure is the way in which it distorts the idea of a public.

It is important to distinguish the idea of neighborhood benefits as used by contemporary economists with the idea of public goods as developed by Aristotle. Neighborhood benefits accrue to individuals as aggregates. Public goods accrue to individuals but only to the extent that they identify with their polis. An example of a neighborhood benefit might be the shade that your neighbors get when *you* decide to plant a tree in your yard. An example of a public good would be a decision of the members of a neighborhood to plant trees for the sake of shade. In the latter, there is a communicative relation between the members of the neighborhood that results in recognition that more shade is needed and in the decision to plant more trees in order to provide it. In the former, no such communicative relationship need exist. Hence, with the idea of neighborhood effects people benefit from the shade even if they have no other relation to one another. In other words, they all benefit, but they do so separately.

The result of the idea of the neighborhood effect as the dominant rationale for tax-supported schools and for parental choice is to make invisible the idea of a public as involving membership in a community and to reduce the idea of a public to that of individuals each acting and benefiting separately. Given this reduction, it is a very easy step to disparage the idea of a public school as not aiming to reproduce a public but rather to substitute government aims for parental ones. Hence the rhetorical shift whereby public schools become “government” schools and where state-supported compulsory education becomes a questionable “state monopoly” on education. The result is not only the justification of tax dollars to private and for-profit schools but, much more important, the dismissal of any but the most minimal and superficially measurable guidelines as appropriate for appraising the worth of education. Yet as we will see a “public” benefit, which, the argument for choice neglects, is not the same as benefits to all its individual members, and freedom is not the same as choice.

### CHOICE IS NOT THE SAME AS FREEDOM

There are conditions when the introduction of choice policies actually serves to distort preferences. Consider the following example: All of the parents on K Street prefer to send their children to the neighborhood school. They prefer this because

the neighborhood school, although not the best academically, is pretty good, and because they want their children's school friends to be their neighborhood friends. There are actually many benefits to this, including the reinforcement of norms when neighbors know each other through knowing each other's children. However, once choice is introduced, all parents realize that their desire for the overlap of school friends and neighborhood friends is no longer possible. Hence, each parent lists as his or her first choice the best academic school in the town. Some parents are successful; others are turned down. Some do get the school in the neighborhood, but it is no longer the *neighborhood* school. It is only located in the neighborhood. It is not of the neighborhood. The result is that no parents get their preferred school because the preferred school would be a neighborhood school with all neighborhood children. And although some parents do get their second choice, the best academic school, most do not. In this case, the introduction of choice results in denying parents their preferences and in making them worse off than they would have been without choice.

Think then of the potential relationships that might have developed between neighbor and neighbor through the mutual care for their children as having had a potential reality, aborted though it was. The group then would not be reducible to all of its members, because although all the members remain the same, their relationship to one another would be different. In one setting they are essentially isolated from each other, whereas in the other they are, through their children and the school, in communicative relation with one another. Here the group develops a kind of ontological status or a reality that although including the desires of its members is not reducible to those members, because it creates possibilities for new and more reflective desires to be formed. Choice has not added freedom to the group because the desire formed under choice—to attend the best academic school—is not the same as a preference that is shaped through shared communication and reflection. Missing is a mode of communication among individual parents that is essential in the formation of shared values. Without such communication in selecting the best academic school for their child, all of the parents can be said to now hold the same values, and in this sense they are shared, but they are shared serially, by each individual, one at a time.

Although public values are to be distinguished from neighborhood effects, interpreted as shared values held individually, they also have to be distinguished from common values, or the acknowledged but often implicit background conditions that generate shared judgments and emotional responses. To see how common values function, consider the following example from Ian McEwan's novel *On Chesil Beach* (2007), a story of opportunity lost. The time is 1962, just before the sexual revolution begins. The scene is the first night of marriage. The characters are the husband, anxious to consummate the marriage, and his musically talented and fragile wife who loves him deeply but dreads the conjugal act. Their inevitable breakup is due to her offering to love him as his wife but to allow him the sexual freedom to satisfy his desires with other women whenever he feels the need. The offer repels him; he takes it as a sign of impurity, and the brief marriage ends in a quick divorce, a divorce that as the sexual revolution advances, he comes to deeply regret.

*On Chesil Beach* illustrates what I mean by common values. They are the assumed understandings and norms that frame or set the emotional register through which the scene is played out. Here, the common values that bind a husband sexually to his wife also disallow a wife to give her husband *permission* to have sex with other woman. There is an unbreakable bond between love, sex, and marriage that is sanctified by the community, where faithfulness is defined through the sexual bond. This background understanding frames the husband's response, whereas the wife is willing to challenge it. And because the bond is interpreted through communal norms, neither partner has the license to redefine it, even for the sake of the marriage itself. Some years later, after the sexual revolution gained traction and the background values were challenged and when, given mutual consent, the tie between faithfulness and the sexual bond could be loosened for special circumstances, the husband in the story now sees how his prior response had been socially constructed through the common values of the time. Of course, by then it is too late for him.

This background understanding that shapes the emotional responses of a given time and place is what I am terming *common values*. Pippin (2010), in describing Nietzsche's view of the soul, sums up nicely what I am getting at by the idea. He writes of Nietzsche:

The soul is merely the name for a collective historical achievement, a mode of self understanding of one sort or another, what we have made ourselves into at one point or another in the service of some ideal or other. (p. 3)

*On Chesil Beach* illustrates Nietzsche's point beautifully and in doing so also illustrates what I mean by a common value and the way it differs from neighborhood effects as shared individual values held individually.

I want now to argue that a key function of a public is to reflect on common values in a way that makes them public values. And I want to argue that a critical role of a public school is to provide students with the background understanding and the skills required to do this together, as members of an emerging public. There are many advantages, and a few disadvantages, in having such schools state supported, but I will address that topic after a closer look at the meaning of a public.

### ARISTOTLE: TOO HIGH A STANDARD, TOO SHORT A TIME

Aristotle's understanding of a public as a group of similarly educated like-minded people, friends, committed to a single common good, and able to deliberate without the cloud of self-interest, clearly, is too narrow for contemporary times and to adopt it leads to either the pessimism of MacIntyre or the manipulative realism of Lippmann. There are areas where this ideal must break down. Although the Athenians may have engaged in public deliberation about war and peace, their generals did not engage in public deliberation about strategy. Public deliberation has limits, especially where goals have already been set and the concern is about the technical means to achieve them. It is in the latter discussion where experts have their most significant place,

although they also have important roles to play in informing a public about the feasibility of goals as well.

MacIntyre's pessimism is grounded in a misunderstanding of this division of labor between goal setting and strategy. Yet one of the first parameters of public formation is to distinguish between accountability to a public, which all elected officials and their appointed aids must be, and public deliberation, which involves a general population in setting and reflectively assenting to norms set through a deliberative process. Without these amendments, Aristotle's model becomes a template for cynicism or despair conditioned by both increased plurality and an idealized and impossible conception of rationality. With them we can come to see both plurality and discordant conceptions of rationality as constraints on a public deliberative process. And when we do this, we will also have a clearer idea of the unique task of a public school.

### RECONCEPTION OF A PUBLIC

Given these constraints, one way to think of a public is not, as Aristotle did, as a group of friends committed to a common good but as a group of strangers tied together by consciousness of a common fate (Williams, 2003) and in direct or indirect communication with one another about the viability of commonly held value. The following is an expanded definition. A public is an authoritative body of (mostly) strangers

- with separate affiliations and identities,
- connected by common concerns,
- who care about the interests and opinions of others,
- who communicate a willingness to seek common principles and seek shared strategies to work out differences, and
- who have direct or indirect authority to shape a common future.

Membership in a public overlaps with political citizenship, but it is not the same. Citizens possess rights to define and pursue the good life, to exercise freedom, and to enjoy liberty. Members of a public, by influencing social and institutional arrangements, work to secure the conditions of everyone's freedom (E. Anderson, 1999, p. 329). This membership in a public entails communicative engagement about mutual benefits and hence may address the limits of liberty. Publics are not agents and thus do not *act* as a body. Rather, governments when appropriately controlled are the agents of the public. Governments act; publics, by setting a tone and developing norms of evaluation, influence and evaluate government action.

The dominant image of a public as a deliberative body, something like a small town meeting, is inappropriate for today's world. A town meeting may be one forum for a public formation, but it is not the only one, and the image is inappropriate for most instances of public formation because it is too immediate and too concrete. It suggests a single gathering in one place at a specific time to deliberate over a specific issue. Yet members of a public communicate with each other in many different ways and over extended space and time.

### **STANDING IN LINE AS AN EXAMPLE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION**

Take the act of voting, for example. Many political scientists and economists point out the futility of voting. For any single person it is inefficient, rarely does a single vote determine an election. In some cases, for example, when members of the same family intend to vote for completely different candidates, a lot of time could be saved if they just agreed to stay home and to not vote at all. The same principle of efficiency applies when you know that your candidate is going to win (or to lose) by a landslide. Yet many people, in seeming defiance to the principle of efficiency do continue to vote. Are they simply irrational, or is there more to their decision than meets the eye?

It is certainly irrational if the act of voting is seen as doing only one thing—casting an officially recorded preference. Yet another way to think about the act of voting is not as just doing one thing but as doing two things at the same time. The first is stating a preference, but the second is legitimizing a system of setting preferences by standing in line. Now to those who vote under conditions of certain defeat or victory, this second thing—the standing in line to vote may well be the more important of the two. Voting is an act of a citizen. It is the exercise of the right to state an official preference. Standing in line to vote is something else. It is a visible signal by a member of a public that voting is an important civic responsibility that serves to legitimize a democratic system itself. Standing in line is not stating a preference. It is an act of mutual communication of members of a public, each of them strangers to one another, about the importance of maintaining institutional legitimacy. And in this communication, the legitimacy of the system is maintained. This is why some people worry when voting turnout is low or when young people do not vote. It is also why terrorists will often try to attack the voting process itself. If people are afraid to communicate legitimacy to one another, then legitimacy itself dissolves.

### **THE CONCEPTS OF RACISM AND SEXISM AS EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC NORM SETTING**

Members of a public are engaged in mutual communication reinforcing common values, for example, voting. However, they are also engaged in a reflection on the appropriateness of common values and their consistency with one another. This reflection may take place over extended periods of time and in various ways, and through different venues, providing common values with their public status. It is here in the engagement of collective reflection on common values that the creative normative work of a public is performed and where the public actually creates and endorses new norms, moral inventions if you will, to address new facts and new situations. The evolution of the concepts of racism and sexual harassment are examples of this intergenerational public work.

The idea of sexual harassment is relatively new and likely was formulated officially and in legal terms in the 1970s. Yet for the idea to be articulated in legal terms, much work needed to be done. Harassment suggests more than just bothering another person. It involves getting in the way of their performing an accepted and legitimate



role. It is not harassment when someone stops a person from robbing a bank, but it is harassment when one is unable to perform a legitimately assigned task. Before the idea of sexual harassment could take shape, the notion that the sexual division of labor had to be rejected as natural.

For the idea of sexual harassment to take shape, the prevailing idea that the proper place of women was in the home and that their singular purpose was to raise children and care for their husbands had to be challenged. Until the idea of a natural sexual division of labor and the common values associated with it were openly questioned, women who sought to have careers outside the home were viewed as misplaced, overly ambitious intruders on the man's domain. The exceptions were wifelike and mother-like roles such as nursing or school teaching or roles that placed women in a subordinate position to men. These roles were acceptable because they were seen as akin to a woman's "natural" work. Without this challenge, the "male" behavior that dominated the work place—sexual jokes, girly calendars, the glass ceiling, and so on—were the accepted common values of the time.

The idea of harassment applied to women required that this idea of a "natural" sexual division of labor be discredited in both individual and collective consciousness and that a new normative template be substituted for it. As the idea of sexual harassment developed, then items such as nude posters or demeaning jokes in the workplace become more than just a personal matter congruent with the common values of the time. They become social, political, and sometimes legal matters.

The concept of racism provides a similar evolutionary trajectory. The word *racism* did not appear in any major English language dictionary before its inclusion in a 1933 edition of *Webster's* where the term *racism* was placed in its "New Words" section and was perhaps the first official acknowledgment of the term (Neilson & Knott, 1933/1950). It was defined then as now in terms of the *belief* in racial superiority, but race did not mean quite the same thing then as it does now. The historian George Fredrickson (2002) tracks the first scholarly use of the term *racism* to the 1920s where it "was first applied to ideologies making invidious distinctions among divisions of the 'white' or Caucasian race, and especially to show that Aryan or Nordics were superior to other people normally considered 'white'" (p. 156). The inclusion in *Webster's* coincided with Hitler's rise to power but did not seem to have any specific application to the treatment of Black people.

Encyclopedias reveal a similar history. The 1910 *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines race as a "tribe, breed, or group of plants, animals, or persons descended from a common ancestor" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1910–1911, p. 774). Beyond a short paragraph, there is nothing further mentioned. The 1936, 1947, and 1957 versions have expanded sections on race but no explicit category for racism. This continues until 1968 and 1974, when more detail on the various attributes of race is added. Ethnicity is equated with race (the article speaks of "East European" races) in the 1968 edition, though no direct entries on either racism or racialism is noted. Racialism is dealt with within the text on race but does not garner a separate entry until the 1974 edition and then in the context of a discussion of historical occurrences, such as the Civil

Rights era. As the discussion shifts over the years, history replaces biology as the relevant conceptual framework, and before “racism” becomes an official entry, there is an expanded discussion on the conflicts of African Americans. By the 1986 and then the 1998 editions, “racism” is an entry of two-page length, with more detail. Of course, these changes did not just take place through scholarly instruments but rather these instruments reflect and then reinforce movements that occur on the street and in the courts, which are then reflected in school texts.

The emergence of the concepts of both sexual harassment and racism as reflections on and challenges to existing common values adds an important intergenerational dimension to the idea of a public and gives public will formation perspective and distance that more traditional notions tend to bypass. In both cases, as aggrieved individuals begin to develop their own collective voice, a value commonly accepted by the dominant groups—that Whites are of greater worth than Blacks, or men are more able than women—is set apart from other dominant common values and reflected on, sometimes as a response to protest or other social events, sometimes as a result of litigation, sometimes in repulsion over systematic and obvious injustices. Hence, public values emerge out of the critique of specific common values and form the premises for a new and *renewed* rationality, and a unique role for public education to transmit and refine those values also emerges.

### IDENTITY AND A COMMON FATE

The first question of public education is not who shall control it, parent or state, or even how it should be financed (Gutmann, 1987). The primary question about public education is how to initiate students into this ongoing intergenerational conversation where they understand that this conversation is about them. It involves creating bonds of trust where new citizens understand that others are able to engage in reasonable discourses, where each accepts the burden of justification, and where students learn to reject servility both intellectually and emotionally, for themselves and for others (Callan, 1997, pp. 152–157). It also entails the extension of Aristotle’s idea of friendship beyond those whom we know or with whom we share close relationships. Danielle Allen (2006) explains this goal in her concept of political friendship, which she defines as “not an emotion, but a practice, a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personal experience and aspiration” (p. xxi). Political friendship extracts its qualities from personal friendship allowing that we all enjoy a life that although not common or identical is nevertheless shared in terms of events, climate, environment, and the likes and begins with the awareness of the fact that “we are always awash in each other’s lives” (Allan, 2006, p. xxii).

In returning to the question of public education, it is useful for us to consider the preconditions of political friendship such as the habit of recognizing, publicly acknowledging, and rejecting servility or promoting habits of deliberation that accept the burden of judgment. These are subtle skills and require exceptional pedagogy to teach. For example, recognizing servility involves sensitivity to the behavior of the quiet and “good” student and teaching a student not to be servile may require delicate

navigation with parental or cultural norms. For educators, it also involves teaching less articulate or shy students to develop the skills needed to give expression to their own ideas and values within a public forum (Mansbridge, 1980). Still, the development of political friendship must often be done at a considerable distance and thus will not have the emotional ties associated with personal friendship. In its place must be a kind of complicated trust. “Trust,” because it provides others with the benefit of the doubt about their intentions. “Complicated,” because it has reservation about the capacity of others to act on my behalf, and because it allows that interests, both my own and others, can change as communication increases.

*Public* understanding does not only mean that individuals must comprehend their common problems and the alternative solutions to them. It also means that each person must have reasonably secure knowledge that every other person understands a problem and is willing to comply with the accepted solutions. And, to cement this understanding, all persons must also know that other people have the same level of secure understanding about their (the first party’s) understanding and willingness. For example, it is not sufficient that everyone just understands that there is a concern about global warming, or even that they be able to appraise the evidence for it. In addition, they need to know that others are aware of the problem and that they too are inclined to comply with the policies to address it. Otherwise one person’s compliance will be seen as futile and everyone has good reason to become a free rider on everyone else. Thus, that person must have secure knowledge that Persons 2, 3, 4, and others have the same knowledge as she or he and that given this knowledge their compliance is secure. “The same understanding” means not only knowing the objective conditions and evidence but also an awareness of the intersubjective conditions that lead to compliance. To secure compliance, Person 1 must know that Persons 2, 3, 4, and others have a similar understanding of Person 1 and then of each other.

In a democracy, this kind of knowledge—both vertical and horizontal—stabilizes commitment and avoids the free rider problem that economists are so fond of citing where one person takes advantage of the goodwill of others. In reality, of course, there will always be free riders. The goals of an education that is public in the strict sense of the term is to encourage students to act *as if* everyone had the requisite knowledge and was willing to comply, with the understanding that their act has communicative value and serves then as a model to encourage compliance. This requires a pedagogical strategy and a curriculum where students are provided respect and where they learn to air their different views while respecting the views of others. Political friendship also requires sensitivity to the interests and standpoint of strangers and it is where students learn to listen to and address the concerns of others.

## REVIEW

The Agora provided an informal space where people developed shared understandings and common interests. Aristotle began to formalize this identity in his discussion of the education appropriate to membership in a public, which he largely

identified with the education of rulers and legislators. The interests that developed were then both vertical—the good of the polis—and horizontal—the enjoyment and respect provided to one’s peers. This horizontal factor was critical. For even the best ideas required sacrifice, and friendship provided the trust that others would not take advantage of your willingness to sacrifice for a larger good. This reconstruction of the Agora is helpful in allowing us to see two sides to truly public education. The first is an engagement in an intergenerational conversation about the public good, and the second is a concern to provide others with a voice in that conversation. The first reflects Aristotle’s vertical concern—the good of the whole. The second reflects his horizontal concern—the respect due to all engaged in the conversation. Today there is a planetary dimension to both of these concerns. Identity has extended from the polis to the globe. Whereas once a shared fate was bounded by the walls of a city-state, today it can extend to the concerns of a planetary community and where there is in addition to more local fates, there is also a global one, dependent on the care of the planet.

### SETTING AN AGENDA FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

The goal of public education is to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with strangers about their shared interests and common fate and to contribute to shaping it. This goal is consistent with conventional education and the development of a reasonable level of proficiency in traditional subject areas, and it certainly does not preclude the importance of education for the development of useful and demanding skills. Indeed, this is a condition of education in general, whether public or not. The idea of a *public* education simply adds another dimension to this, and it is as much concerned with matters of pedagogy and method as it is with subject matter.

Since that conversation between strangers extends across generational lines and involves the development of the capacity to reflect on and address common values, sometimes to renew them, sometimes to change them, a public education requires students to understand and develop their own agency. It also requires that they gain perspective on their own commitments and emotional responses. Distance and perspective are gained in the academic curriculum by developing the habit of reflecting on one’s own production, whether it be a work of art, a piece of writing, an argument, a math proof, or a craft production, and to see it through the eyes of others. This is one reason why open discussion and critical peer evaluation are important components of public education, and why subject matter proficiency alone (Hirsch, 1987), although necessary, is not sufficient. Perspective and distance is also gained through the nonformal aspects of school life in terms of the inclusiveness of the student body and the teachers and the way in which interaction among different cultural, religious, racial, and social class groups is encouraged. In schools where students from different background can intermingle, stereotypes can be directly addressed and uncritically accepted assumptions can be reconsidered.

## MUST A PUBLIC SCHOOL BE A GOVERNMENT SCHOOL AND MUST A GOVERNMENT SCHOOL BE A PUBLIC SCHOOL

The present debate about public education involves school choice, and I now want to return to that topic. For the most part, the idea of choice as it is advanced today by neoconservatives is not consistent with the idea of a public education. This is because it encourages parents to select schools along class or racial lines or because of some other group similarity. This need not be the case (Brighouse, 2000), but often lacking is the face-to-face encounter with children from different groups that is essential to a public formation. In many cases, these schools diminish the idea of a public.

Nevertheless, given the homogeneity of neighborhood schools (Reich, 2008) and the present tendency of people to live in neighborhoods where their neighbors share their outlook, it is not clear that government-supported neighborhood schools are always a lot more public in the sense that I have described it here. Moreover, there are sometimes acceptable academic reasons for educating together students who share important similarities. Age and maturity level is one obvious case. Special needs and maintaining cultural coherence in certain cases of vulnerability are sometimes others (Feinberg, 1998; Kymlicka, 1995). Given these and other exceptions, we can still make very broad distinctions.

For example, a public school is distinguished from a private school whose specific task might be to reproduce a certain class or to provide students with the outlook of that class. And it is also to be distinguished from many religious schools whose distinct mission is to reproduce a congregation loyal to a specific set of devotional beliefs. This does not mean that religious and private schools cannot serve important public ends; they often do. Yet if they were to also be thought of as public schools, the uniformity they seek would need to be addressed and they would need to be publicly accountable. I have addressed this elsewhere and so will not go into it here (Feinberg, 2008). However, here it is important to distinguish schools that serve a public good from schools that reproduce a public, where students are taught to engage with strangers about a common fate.

What needs to be emphasized is just how much this understanding differs from the current usage. The present understanding of a public education is framed in economic terms with the emphasis on support. Given this understanding, then the civic ideal of a public school, as the site where a public is reproduced, is replaced by an economic function. Schools function to produce marketable skills. Given this shift, then of course it makes sense to enable parents to choose the schools that they want for their own children, and as long as it meets minimum state standards it may sometimes make sense for them to receive state support, given the broad requirement for equality of opportunity. Yet my argument has been that in losing sight of the public role of public education, we lose the process of public formation altogether and that this is a very high price to pay.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>This needs to be amended as referring to an ideal since Aristotle also observed that the character of education would depend on the character of the constitution of a given state.

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