Education for Critical Citizenship

Tapio Puolimatka
University of Helsinki

Meira Levinson's essay is an interesting and well-argued contribution to the discussion between deliberative and adversarial democracy. I find her arguments illuminative and convincing. Even though I am in basic agreement with much that is expressed in the essay, I will focus on some aspects that are not fully explicated and might need some clarification.

The first issue concerns the difference between the principles functioning as the basis of the political system and those guiding civic education. I suggest that these principles may legitimately be widely divergent. One may defend adversarial democracy as a systemic principle in political practice and still defend an education that aims to develop the capacities needed in political deliberation. The reason for this discrepancy is that civic education must be grounded on moral ideals like respect for human freedom, autonomy, and rational self-direction. When it comes to structuring the political system, however, one will have to make some assumptions about the success of such education in the population at large. One may aim to develop the capacities needed for critical citizenship in political education for ethical reasons, and still be skeptical about the success of such an education. Therefore, one may assume that the majority of citizens will be easily led by political propaganda and prevailing attitudes instead of forming their opinions critically and independently. Such realistic considerations might not cause one to change one's educational aims, but they should influence one's view about the systemic principles needed for the proper functioning of the political system.

Education and democracy can be understood both as normative and descriptive concepts. The democratic ideal contrasts with the reality of empirical democracies. The ideal is not determined by the empirical situation, but by what is worth pursuing. At the same time systemic considerations cannot be based merely on the ideal, they also have to take into account the empirical reality of particular democracies. The realistic perspective has to be balanced by ethical considerations. The fact that empirical democracies do not correspond to the democratic ideal of the rule by the people is not in itself a sufficient reason to reject the ideal. On the contrary, the need for the ideal is more urgent when reality diverges from it. The fact that many empirical democracies provide examples of citizen indifference and irrationality does not mean that enlightened political participation is not an ideal. Our failure to practice the virtues of democratic citizenship is all the more reason to focus attention on the ideal. The real tragedy is to lose sight of the ideal, since that blocks the way of progress toward it. The democratic ideal, therefore, is not determined by the political reality prevalent in democratic societies. On the contrary, empirical democracies have to be evaluated on the basis of the democratic ideal.

Once democracy is understood as a moral ideal, it is not defined primarily in terms of systemic properties such as the number of competing groups. This does not

mean, however, that the systemic effects of, for example, widespread political participation can be ignored.[1] However, instead of viewing democracy predominantly in terms of systemic properties, the democratic ideal emphasizes people as ends-in-themselves rather than as objects or means to an end.[2] This implies that citizens should influence the political decision-making process. Democracy is thus a normative concept which sets an ideal for political reality, its procedures, institutional arrangements as well as its political actors. The proper functioning of democracy assumes that a considerable proportion of the citizens practice the relevant moral virtues of an enlightened political participation including concern for justice, equality, and freedom.

At some points of her article, Levinson seems to assume that it is not indispensable for civic education to promote critical citizenship because of the great psychological price involved in such an education for minority students. She points out that if we want to teach minority students to be critical participants in the democratic community, we would have to give them a realistic picture of their outsider status in the community. But it is

> troubling to teach citizens (or future citizens) that they are "outsiders" of a civic community.…In order to teach them to function effectively as insiders in the deliberative process, however, the school must simultaneously teach minority students that they are "outsiders" in the sense of having to learn and use a "language of power" that is initially not their own.

Even though this is a valid point, it is difficult to see, how the problem could be avoided. Democratic education ought to foster critical citizens, whatever the systemic principle that prevails in a democracy. One would have to educate in this way even though one ought not to build the democratic system on the assumption that we will be very successful in this. Systemic considerations have to be separated from educational concerns. Civic education should aim to educate critical citizens who are capable of acting as independent actors and having independent political influence even though we cannot build the democratic system on the optimistic assumption that students coming from minority communities will have an equal voice and be equally understood in civic deliberation.

Minorities cannot avoid the sense of being outsiders, because the dominant culture tends to be self-centered and to push them to the side without even being conscious of it. It is only appropriate that education should try to provide minorities with the tools they need to advance their position in society. That assumes that they are made aware of the obstacles they have to overcome. The question is, of course, at what stage of their development are children capable of facing their depressing reality? One could assume, however, that in any case they cannot escape the fact because they will be forced to encounter it in innumerable ways.

Deliberative democracy is right in emphasizing that democracy presupposes rational and informed citizens, whose influence on the political decision-making process is not restricted to elections, but who are rational participators in the public debate about political issues. Only an enlightened electorate can use its political power to promote policies that are in line with its real interest. It is not sufficient for citizens to influence political decisions in elections. In addition, citizens should be

provided with opportunities for exerting political influence through taking part in the processes of debate, criticism, and cooperative effort upon which democracy depends. Unless more public space is established for citizens, beyond the ballot box, their political influence will be restricted in a manner which would seem to violate the democratic principle of the rule of the people. The establishment of public space should go together with equipping citizens with the capacity for making constructive use of it. The problem with deliberative democracy is in its assumption that it is possible to find a sufficiently neutral argumentative ground to arrive at an agreed judgment.

Levinson is, therefore, right in criticizing the overly optimistic view that deliberative democracy has about the possibilities of such deliberation. David Miller suggests, for example, that politics should proceed "through an open and uncoerced discussion of the issue at stake with the aim of arriving at an agreed judgment" and that "the search for agreement will itself act as a filter on the kinds of reason that prevail in the discussion."[3]

This view assumes that rational discussion will lead to a consensus. This contrasts with Mikhail Bakhtin's suggestion that critical and open discussion does not necessarily or even ideally lead to unanimity but to greater diversity of opinion.[4] Bakhtin's idea is that different individuals have different world views and once they become conscious of their fundamental intuitions about reality their views will radically diverge from each other. Arguments hide assumptions about reality that often remain unexpressed. If citizen's views diverge from each other as a result of open and critical discussion, it may not be possible to operate the political system on the basis of "an agreed judgment," even though argument has its part to play in the political process.

Bakhtinian education emphasizes the tension between different voices. Unanimity can be reached only by dampening the individual voices of the participants either by monological education or by manipulative tactics. Genuine discussion promotes mutual understanding but it may only sharpen the disagreements as a result of a better self-understanding.

---

1. Giovanni Sartori, *Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1987); and K. Stahlberg and V. Helander, "Influence and Participation," in *Essays in Democratic Theory*, ed. D. Anckar, and E. Berndtson (Tampere: The Finnish Political Science Association, 1984), 35-37.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979), 2d sect.; see also Israel Scheffler, *Of Human Potential* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 37-38, 85.

3. David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Oxford: Politi Press, 2000), 9, 151.

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).