

# Democracy Beyond the Mirror: A Lacanian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## A CRISIS OF EDUCATION OR A CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY?

“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance,” so begins Martha Nussbaum’s important defense of the liberal arts, *Not for Profit*.<sup>2</sup> The crisis of which Nussbaum speaks is a crisis of education. Nussbaum’s concern is the trend in education, observable in many nations across the world, of eschewing the arts and humanities in favor of disciplines that focus on “useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making.”<sup>3</sup> Lost when the arts and humanities are neglected, Nussbaum claims, are “abilities crucial to the health of any democracy,” such as, “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.”<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum warns: unless these abilities are cultivated, “democracy is bound to fail,” as the world’s populations will amount to little more than “useful machines,” completely incapable of imagining in one another “the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human.”<sup>5</sup>

I take seriously Nussbaum’s concern for the health of democracy as well as her critique of education—indeed, I share her sentiments. Nevertheless, I want to challenge an aspect of her account: namely, the causality that Nussbaum posits between education and democracy. On Nussbaum’s account, it is education’s abandonment of its social and humanistic responsibilities that threatens to undermine democracy. In other words, according to Nussbaum, the crisis of education causes the

crisis of democracy. There is no doubt something very appealing, if not convincing, in this chain of causality: education carries the burden of shaping the young, and so, one imagines, quite naturally, that undemocratic behavior must stem from a systematic failure in education to cultivate democratic sensibilities in the young. Appealing, yes; but is it correct? Is it indeed the case that a crisis in education is causing a crisis in democracy? Or, could something else be responsible for the poor state of our democracy—something endemic to democracy itself, perhaps?

To be absolutely clear, I have no quarrel with Nussbaum's respective assessments of education and democracy in themselves: there is no disputing, in my mind, that education is becoming alarmingly instrumentalist, on one hand, and that democracy, especially in its institutional forms of state and government, are becoming increasingly dysfunctional, on the other. What I question is the notion that the dysfunction in our democracies stems from the instrumentalization of our educational systems. As an alternative, I want to suggest that we are witnessing dysfunction in our systems of democracy, not because of education's instrumentalization (as problematic as that is), but because of a weakness in our notions of democracy. That is to say, the current instrumentalist turn in education is not the problem itself, but a symptom of a larger problem in our conception of democracy. That problem, I want to suggest, lies in the ideal of equality that underpins so many of our notions of democracy.

### EQUALITY: A WORKING DEFINITION

What do I mean by equality? To be sure, equality means different things at different times for different theorists (e.g., equality of rights, equality of opportunity, etc.), but I have found there is always a deeper form of equality that underwrites all these appearances of the concept: an equality of an ontological sort, that is, an equality that we possess purely by

our being democratic subjects. We glimpse this type of ontological equality, for example, when John Stuart Mill evokes our supposed sovereignty over our minds and bodies, when Nussbaum urges us to see the other as possessing a soul, or when Alain Badiou asserts equality as an outright axiom. It is this a priori equality, this equality that we supposedly possess as an ontological fact—what democrats try to capture in their appeals to our equality before the law, but what a more psychoanalytically informed thinker might describe as our equality before the Other—that interests me here. While I do not reject such an ideal of equality—to be sure, a noble ideal—I will argue in this article that this equality, seen through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is incapable of generating the reciprocity that many democratic theorists, like Nussbaum, seek. After this critique, I will end by adumbrating what might be called, a democracy beyond the mirror, that is, a democracy beyond the ideal of equality.

### *Equality in Democratic Theory*

Equality is a hallmark of democracy. Thomas Jefferson asserted that “The true foundation of republican government is the equal right of every citizen.”<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill claimed that when it comes to the management of our “own body and mind,” we are all “sovereign.”<sup>7</sup> But the idea of equality does not stop at our status as subjects; democratic theorists extend equality to the expectations we have for each other and obligations we owe one another—i.e., reciprocity.<sup>8</sup>

We find this application of equality in Nussbaum, for example, when she writes that democracy depends on its citizens’ ability to imagine “in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion,” that is, “the ability to see other people as human beings.”<sup>9</sup> It is not enough to understand ourselves as rich and complex human beings, possessing the full range of thought and emotion (what Nussbaum calls, the soul). De-

mocracy depends on us seeing these same soul-attributes in others. Amy Guttmann and Dennis Thompson, authors of *The Spirit of Compromise*, also make the same use of equality when they urge lawmakers to have mutual respect for each other, since, as they claim, individuals characterized by mutual respect resist cynicism by “presuming their adversaries are as well motivated as they are.”<sup>10</sup> Democratic governance, according to Guttmann and Thompson, relies on us seeing our adversaries as possessing the same noble intentions that we believe ourselves to possess, despite the difficulty of that task.

Even discourse theorists, such as Jurgen Habermas, make use of equality, though equality, for him, has a procedural rather than a psychological foundation. In “a discourse-theoretic interpretation,” Habermas writes, democracy draws its legitimacy from “the communicative presuppositions that allow the better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation, and from the procedures that secure fair bargaining processes.”<sup>11</sup> So, while Habermas does not require that individuals in a democracy impute specific psychological attributes to each other or even that they share similar moral positions, he nevertheless contends that democratic individuals extend to one another the same discursive requisites. To wit: I may not agree that you (or I) possess a soul, I may not concede that your motivations, though different than mine, are nonetheless noble like mine; but I nevertheless concede that you and I may engage in democratic deliberation because we follow the same rules and standards of rational discourse.

The radical conception of democracy, arguably more than any other democratic tradition, advances the cause of equality. In its radical form, “the aim of democratic politics,” Chantal Mouffe explains, “is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary,’ that is, somebody whose

ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.”<sup>12</sup> We do not put the rights of our adversaries in question, Mouffe goes on to explain, because, ultimately, “we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy,” though “we disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles,” and do not expect that such disagreement “could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion.”<sup>13</sup> Here, equality is not predicated on us possessing souls, neither is it predicated on a common mindset nor on a common set of discursive rules; rather, it is asserted a priori—as Alain Badiou puts it: “equality is not an objective for action, it is an axiom of action.”<sup>14</sup>

Considering the high place democratic theorists have given equality, it is no wonder that we interpret threats to democracy through its lens. From the perspective of the above theories, threats to democracy, such as, racism, sexism or homophobia, all stem from a failure to live up to the ideal of equality. Thus racism occurs when whites do not treat people of color as their equals; sexism, when men do so to women; and homophobia, when heterosexuals do so to the LGBTQ community. On this view, the task of creating a strong democracy lies in the struggle for equality. Indeed, for this reason, some theorists, such as, Norberto Bobbio, have made the struggle for equality the very essence of democracy as such.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, the remedy to such threats as racism, sexism and homophobia is equality. Never—and this is quite understandable—do we consider that equality could be a *cause* of these problems, that people could discriminate not because they see the other as inferior but precisely *because* they see them as co-equal and therefore a *threat* to their own positions. From this perspective, racism (with sexism, homophobia, along with other forms of discrimination sharing a similar logic) occurs when whites see people of color as their equal and therefore legitimately entitled to a share of social and political power. Discrimination, in this

case, is a kind of defense mechanism against the threat to one's social standing (that is, a racist discriminates against the other in order to protect their monopoly on racialized social power, not because they see the other as subhuman). To be sure, in raising this possibility, I am not attempting to diminish the importance of equality as a social ideal and political goal—indeed, I agree that equality should be one of the aims of democracy. I am also not suggesting, in any conceivable way, that we abandon the struggle for equality—the struggle for equality constitutes one of the highest callings of a democracy. And to be absolutely clear, I am not justifying or legitimizing discrimination in any way. Rather, I am raising this possibility in order to speak to the complex relationship equality has with discrimination, not only so that we have a better grasp of how they interact with each other but also so that we have a more accurate understanding of how we can form a stronger democracy. To understand how equality might function as a cause of discrimination, I want to turn to the work of the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, and in particular to his theory of the mirror-stage, developed in the 1940s.

### LACAN'S THEORY OF THE MIRROR-STAGE

In 1949, Jacques Lacan presented the paper, "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in Zurich.<sup>16</sup> In this paper, Lacan focuses on a common phenomenon in the early development of children—namely, their fascination with their mirror-image. Early in life—Lacan is not specific about the exact age; he mentions the age of six months, but more important than age, the child "has not yet mastered walking, or even standing"—a child will be brought before a mirror by some (parental) other and will be told of its reflection, "That is you!"<sup>17</sup> Lacan observes that whereas other primates will not take any interest in their reflections, human children will

greet their reflections with “a flutter of jubilant activity.”<sup>18</sup> What interests Lacan in this scene is precisely this reaction: why does a human child react excitedly at its image while other primates show only indifference?

To understand the child’s unique reaction, Lacan argues that we must understand this encounter as an identification. When a child encounters its image in a mirror, it reacts excitedly because it recognizes the image as an image of itself—that is to say, the child identifies with its image—something that other animals do not (think, in contrast, of those videos of dogs barking at their own mirror-image). This identification, Lacan postulates, is foundational in the development of a child’s sense of self (what he calls the I-function); it is, for him, “the rootstock” that forms the basis of later or secondary identifications with others.<sup>19</sup>

As important as this event is to the development of our sense of self, Lacan highlights the “fictional” quality of this identification.<sup>20</sup> By fictional, Lacan does not mean that this identification takes place in make believe, but rather that it is based on a false sense of perfection and self-mastery. When a child encounters its image, it sees itself as a fully formed totality—a “gestalt”—which, he explains, stands in strict juxtaposition with “the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it.”<sup>21</sup> The level of completion and unity possessed by the mirror-image does not reflect the child’s experience of its actual body. The child, at this age, does not yet have control over its own body. It still depends upon others for even the simplest and basest needs, such as, nourishment and movement, which is ironically epitomized by the fact that the child must be held up to the mirror by some other. And yet, what it sees in the mirror is an image of itself as a fully formed body that is under its complete control—the child moves an arm, the mirror-image moves an arm; the child moves a leg, the mirror-image does likewise. It is this sense of self-mastery that Lacan sees as the ultimate source for the

child's jubilation. This image of self-mastery, completion and unity will be the basis on which our sense of self—our I-function—is formed. But because it does not align with our actual experience, a split will emerge in our subjectivity between our sense of who we think we are and who we actually are.

One year before the Zurich Congress, Lacan presented a paper, entitled "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," at the Eleventh Congress of French-Speaking Psychoanalysts.<sup>22</sup> In this paper, Lacan comments on the various ways aggressiveness manifests in the psychoanalytic experience. At one point, Lacan asks his audience: what would happen "if a patient saw in his analyst an exact replica of himself?"<sup>23</sup> Lacan's response is that in such a situation "the patient's excess of aggressive tension would prove such an obstacle" to the analysis so as to make the work of analysis ineffective.<sup>24</sup> That is to say, if the patient saw the analyst as an equal, the patient would manifest aggressiveness, and enough aggressiveness to derail the analysis. But why? Why would the patient respond aggressively to the analyst, especially if the patient perceived the analyst to be an "exact replica," that is, as an equal? For Lacan, the idea that someone would exhibit aggressiveness toward an equal, as in the case of analysis, only makes sense "if the way is paved for it by a primary identification that structures *the subject as rivaling with himself*."<sup>25</sup> Lacan's claim is that aggressiveness toward our equals is explained by or modeled after aggressiveness toward ourselves because we are our first equals. If that is the case, then when do we ever observe human beings engaged in rivalry with themselves? What is "the rootstock" of this rivalry with our equals? Lacan's answer is: the mirror-stage.

We saw, in the "Mirror-Stage" paper, that the child identifies with its mirror-image insofar as it recognizes this image as an image of itself—or, to say it another way, the child recognizes its mirror-image



as its equal (or, in yet another way, the [parental] Other recognizes the child and its image as equals with the words “That is you!”). We also saw, from that essay, that this relationship is fictional or imaginary insofar as the mirror-image possesses a level of perfection, unity, wholeness and self-mastery that does not correspond to the child’s existential experience. Because of this gap between what the child sees in the mirror and its existential experience, the child will become alienated from its mirror-image—meaning, it will perceive its image, not as identical to itself but as an external object. In the “Aggressiveness” paper, Lacan adds that, as a result, the child can experience a range of negative emotions before its image. The child may feel “a sense of inferiority”: why am I not as perfect as my image?<sup>26</sup> The child may feel resentment towards its image: the image has a perfection that is rightfully mine! Or, indeed, the child may feel rage, which can result in harm towards its image or even towards itself: because I cannot live up to this ideal, I will destroy the ideal or indeed myself ...

Lacan’s lesson is that our relationships to ourselves are fundamentally ambivalent. We experience jubilation toward our image, but we also experience frustration and resentment. And this ambivalence is integral to our sense of self, our I-function. We must also remember that the mirror-stage is not simply a single event; it constitutes the basis, the model, or, to use Lacan’s words, “the rootstock” of subsequent identifications, ensuring that future egalitarian relationships will be struck with a “structural ambivalence,” whether that is the relationship between children, a patient and an analyst, or democratic subjects.<sup>27</sup>

## DEMOCRACY BEYOND THE MIRROR

Let us now return to the question of democracy and apply Lacan’s insights. The fundamental political lesson that should be drawn from

Lacan's mirror-stage theory is that relations of equality are never straightforward; they are always ambivalent. Seeing the other as my equal—say, as a “fellow American” or a “fellow human being”—may fill me with jubilation, which, in turn, may compel me to treat them with reciprocity. But it is equally possible that seeing the other as my equal may fill me with resentment, which, in turn, may drive me to harm the other. For example, when I see myself reflected in the refugee or the immigrant—that is to say, when I see the refugee/immigrant as my equal—I may see them as someone who is like me and therefore in need of my compassion, but I may also see them as someone who is like me and therefore wonder why they should enjoy resources and aid that I feel are rightfully mine. If we are equals before the Other, I may wonder, then why does the government assist them more than me? From the perspective of most democratic theorists, inequality causes injustice (exemplary, here, is Nussbaum, who pins the failure of democracy on our inability to imagine each other as people who, like us, are endowed with a soul). But from a Lacanian perspective, injustice results, not only when we see each other as our subordinates but also when we see each other as our equals, for when we see ourselves reflected in the mirror of the other, we will see them as a legitimate rival for the self-determination, autonomy, or recognition that we feel are rightfully ours.

The Lacanian perspective does not suggest that we abandon democracy as a social and political project. Nor does it even suggest that we repudiate equality itself. Rather, it advises that we not rely upon equality to eliminate social antagonisms—to wit: strive for equality, but don't be surprised if antagonisms, such as, racism, sexism, and homophobia, exist even after equality is achieved. It recommends, in other words, that we seek a different foundation for democracy than equality—a democracy beyond the mirror.

What basis for democracy does Lacan suggest? What, in other words, does a democracy beyond the mirror look like? I would like to suggest that a democracy informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis would be predicated, not on equality but on *difference*. Now, there have been others—most notably, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari—who have offered difference as an alternative to equality, but I would like to distinguish the Lacanian sense of difference sharply from what they offer: whereas Deleuze and Guattari use difference to signify our difference from each other (the ways in which we are unlike each other), Lacanian difference refers to our difference from ourselves (the ways in which we are unlike our image, the ways in which we fail to fully assume our ideal).<sup>28</sup> To understand this Lacanian sense of difference more fully, let us return once again to Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage.

We have already said that, in the mirror-stage, the child forms an identification with its mirror-image and that this identification is fictitious insofar as the image possesses a wholeness that is lacking in the child's own existential experience, which fills the child not only with jubilation but aggressiveness as well, since it cannot fully experience the type of wholeness reflected in the mirror. We also said that the mirror-stage is the primary identification, the rootstock, upon which all other, secondary identifications are modelled, and as such, the child will grow into an adult who exhibits jubilation as well as aggressiveness towards others insofar as these others appear to enjoy that elusive wholeness. In this drama—the drama of the mirror, so to speak—we can detect a fatal error in the child's assessment of others. The child, according to the theory, resents the other because the other appears to possess the wholeness and self-mastery that the child so wants for itself. What the child—and not just the child, but we all—does not recognize is the universality of the mirror-stage. Lacan did not propose the mirror-stage to explain this one child's—or my—experience, as if it were unique. Lacan proposed the

mirror-stage to explain subjectivity as such. That is to say, what the child does not realize is that the other also fails to fully assume the mastery and wholeness they see reflected in the mirror-image. Just as the child is separated from its mirror-image, so too is the other. Or to put it yet another way, no one is fully themselves; we as subjects are all constituted by our difference with our image, our ideal-I. None of us are fully our image; as such, none of us possesses the self-determination that others perceive us enjoying.

I hesitate to use the word equality to describe the universality of the mirror-stage because the fact of our internal difference (that is, our difference with our ideal-image) is not an artefact of how we *imagine* the other's predicament. I do *not* say, like Nussbaum might, that we must "imagine sympathetically" the other failing to fully occupy its mirror-image.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the other fails to fully occupy its mirror-image *despite* what we might imagine for them. Rather, I take what Lacan captures in the mirror-stage theory to be a structural or ontological description of subjectivity as such. To put it in terms of the definition of equality as equality before the Other, which I gave in the introduction: the universality of our self-difference is not an equality because its status is not guaranteed by the Other. We are not self-different because of our standing before the Other. Indeed, if anything, we recognize our split *despite* the Other: that is to say, when we recognize our split we do so precisely *because* we cannot fully assume our mirror-image, an imagine that the Other holds out before us and claims is us. Thus when we realize that we are not our mirror-image, that we can never be the ideal-I, and we stop the vain pursuit of becoming this ideal, we no longer need to appeal to the Other's recognition to secure our place as subjects (that is to say, we no longer need the protection of equality to secure our subjectivity)—for those that embrace their internal difference, the Other simply ceases to exist.

Despite appearances, Lacan's mirror-stage is not a tragedy. It does not say that we are all condemned to the pursuit of unhappiness. Rather, I have claimed that it provides the foundation for democracy. We can already see how a recognition of the universality of difference would defuse social antagonisms: once I recognize that the immigrant does not enjoy any more than me, that the immigrant does not possess goods that I feel are rightfully mine, then I no longer have any cause for aggressiveness. (Note that I did not put this scenario in terms of equality: I did not say that we must imagine the immigrant as unhappy as us.) The remedy for social injustice is not equality, but difference. But at the same time, difference does not put an end to antagonism as such. To the contrary, it keeps antagonism alive, although that antagonism is no longer located between the subject and the other but rather between the subject and itself (that is, between us and the ideal-I held out in front of us in the mirror). We all fail to fully occupy our images, and as such we all experience dissatisfaction. But, as Joan Copjec has rightly pointed out, this dissatisfaction is not the end but the beginning insofar as it serves as the source of democratic desire, for in our failure to occupy our images, we become free to determine the terms of our subjectivity for ourselves: "It is only this dissatisfaction and this struggle over the definition of the subject and of its relation to other subjects that prevent us from surrendering these definitions to the Other. It is only because I doubt that I am therefore a democratic citizen."<sup>30</sup> Subjects are, in a very real sense, condemned to freedom—that is to say, we are always free to determine the terms of our subjectivity. And what could be more democratic than self-determination?

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- 2 Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1.
- 3 Ibid., 2.
- 4 Ibid., 7.
- 5 Ibid., 2, 6.
- 6 Thomas Jefferson, "To Samuel Kercheval, Monticello, July 12, 1816," in *The Declaration of Independence*, ed. Michael Hardt (New York: Verso, 2007), 70.
- 7 John Stewart Mill, *On Liberty* (Arlington Heights, IL: Croft, 1947), 10.
- 8 Amy Gutman, "A guiding principle of deliberative democracy is reciprocity among free and equal individuals," in *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xii.
- 9 Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 6.
- 10 Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, eds., *The Spirit of Compromise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 110.
- 11 Jurgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," in *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994), 4.
- 12 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 101-2.
- 13 Ibid., 102.
- 14 Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 72.
- 15 See Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2006).
- 16 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 2006).
- 17 Ibid., 75-6.
- 18 Ibid., 76.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Jacques Lacan, "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," in *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 2006).
- 23 Ibid., 89.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 95 (emphasis added).
- 26 Ibid., 93.
- 27 Ibid., 92.
- 28 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- 29 Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 7.
- 30 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 161.