

Civil Society and the Priority of Educational Aims

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Hugh Sockett’s “Education for Civil Society” is a welcome response to the painful reality that, even as the U.S. and world face mounting problems, truth “as a regulative ideal (and reason with it) is being discarded, leaving no vehicle but violence for solving disputes.”¹ How should education respond to this decline of democratic institutions and the associated growing preference for authoritarian leadership over democratic politics? Sockett’s article offers a prolegomenon to a larger study in educational aims and methods, so following a brief overview I will focus my comments on three aspects of the project that warrant further investigation: the relationships between the norms of schools, private institutions, and public life; motivational aspects of the contrast between market and moral economies; and how educational aims should be prioritized.

The article announces itself as arguing that “the education of children as individual persons should be *subordinate to* their education as members of democratic civil society.”² This suggests that a basic issue at stake is the priority of competing educational aims. Rousseau framed this as the question of whether education is properly *for* the child or *for* society, and in the landscape of the thirty years that have come and gone since the publication of Amy Gutmann’s *Democratic Education*, Sockett’s position seems to fall closer to the Gutmann, Eamonn Callan, and Stephen Macedo camp than the John White, Harry Brighouse, and James Dwyer camp.³ The former treat the education of citizens as fundamental, while the latter give priority to students’ individual flourishing. Sockett is not expressly concerned with *citizenship*, however, but with participation in civil

society and the cooperation and reciprocity he takes to be characteristic of civil society. His argument is essentially that present circumstances demand education that will integrate children into civil society “to offset social disintegration” and “promote a coherent civil society.”⁴ Schools will need to adopt the norms – or defining features of the “moral economy” – of civil society in order to provide such education.⁵ Learning should be collaborative, non-self-regarding, and include public service; evaluation should be designed so as to not undermine intrinsic motivation; schools should be communities that promote mutual care, are responsive to students’ needs, and promote reciprocity and cooperation across various social divides, including age and class.

CIVIL INSTITUTIONS V. DEMOCRATIC PUBLICS

One aspect of the project that will need to be sorted out and developed is the relationships between the moral economy of schools, the norms of particular institutions of civil society, and fair terms of cooperation for the society as a whole. If the concern is to promote a “coherent” civil society that is not fatally polarized and headed toward authoritarianism, then we must all see ourselves as members of a democratic public and accept fair terms of political cooperation embodied in a constitution. Sockett is concerned that “too much focus on democratic government encourages us to diminish the sense of our place as citizens in society,” but he does not return to the question of the survival of democracy and explain how shifting schools from the norms of a market economy to the norms of a moral economy would contribute to saving democracy.⁶ There are ways in which his proposed educational reforms would be beneficial, I believe, but the benefits for political culture would not be fully mediated by greater participation in institutions of civil society or by acceptance of the norms of reciprocity applicable *within* the

specific institutions people find congenial. Sockett's phrase "citizens in society" blurs the distinction between citizenship in a sovereign state and membership in a social entity, and the article's opening reference to "democratic civil society" seems to presuppose that all institutions of civil society are democratic, both internally and in their stance toward non-members and the constitutional norms of their host societies.

When Sockett begins to contrast "the market economy" and "the moral economy" of civil society it is with the *assumption* that civil society is a sphere of "voluntary cooperation" mediated by "norms of trust, friendship, shared responsibilities, and in the family commitment to the intrinsic value of the other."⁷ It is not clear whether this assumption takes the form of an empirical generalization, a regulative ideal, or both. Considered as an empirical generalization, it cannot be taken for granted. Nor does it help Sockett's cause that he follows communitarian orthodoxy in identifying the family and church as the "main" institutions of civil society. There are families and churches friendly to liberal democracy and others hostile to it, both externally and in their inner workings, and the partisanship of clan and sect has more than occasionally been an obstacle to a cooperative political culture. We are in crisis now not because Americans are turning their backs on families and churches as such, but because they are turning their backs on institutions of public knowledge and public reason – academies of science, universities, a free press that is widely trusted and informed by the expertise and professionalism cultivated by universities. The assault on these institutions has been underway and growing for decades, and it feeds on the resentment of those who have been left behind by a global educational revolution. I applaud the steps toward strengthening civic education that Sockett outlines, but a focus on public reason and public knowledge should receive far more attention as the project develops. We also need an account of how participation in the right kinds of civic institutions would serve as a bridge to goodwill

and cooperation in the political spheres that have become dysfunctional and less democratic.⁸

INCENTIVES AND MOTIVATION

The “basic incentive of the market economy is self-interest,” Sockett writes, while “the basic incentive of the moral economy is reciprocal service.”⁹ The latter involves “intrinsic motivation to help others, often described as altruism, quite distinct from service in the market economy, e.g., of a waiter in a restaurant.”¹⁰ He continues by discussing the displacement of intrinsic motivation by extrinsic incentives, and warns that pursuit of grades threatens to displace “love of knowledge.” This is a big and important topic and well worth pursuing, but I think it will be important to begin from a conception of economic actors that does not accept the official ideology of market relations. Reliance on this ideology in framing the characteristics of the market economy yields an artificially polarized contrast between economic and civil institutions and actors. It also misrepresents the prospects and benefits of employers abandoning their unscientific, counterproductive, and demoralizing reliance on commonplace but mistaken assumptions about the effects of “incentivizing” the behaviors they desire. As a long-time observer and recent participant in the motivational research on which Sockett indirectly relies, I should also emphasize that it provides the basis for redesigning schools *and workplaces* to be happier, more cooperative, and more conducive to the kind of national political culture we need.¹¹

THE PRIORITY OF ENDS

I conclude now with an observation about the article’s description of itself as arguing that “the education of children as individual persons

should be *subordinate* to their education as members of democratic civil society.”¹² No such argument is presented in the article, and it is not clear to me what the strategy for constructing one would be. Why would it not be enough to argue that civic education should be a much higher priority in schools than it is at present? One could defend this thesis while holding, as I do, that the fundamental purpose of all just institutions, including educational institutions, is to enable people to live well.¹³ It is inconceivable that a society could succeed in enabling all its members to live well except through a kind of eudaimonic reciprocity that would take us a long way toward the moral economy that Sockett envisions.¹⁴

1 Hugh Sockett, “Education for Civil Society,” this volume.

2 Ibid., italics added.

3 Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); John White, *Exploring Well-being in Schools: A Guide to Making Children’s Lives More Fulfilling* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, 2005); James Dwyer, *Religious Schools v. Children’s Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

4 Sockett, this volume.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 For a comprehensive account of civic education, see Randall Curren and Charles Dorn, *Patriotic Education in a Global Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

9 Sockett, this volume.

10 Ibid.

11 For a theory of just institutions predicated on this psychological research,

see Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger, *Living Well Now and in the Future: Why Sustainability Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

12 Sockett, this volume, italics added.

13 See Curren and Dorn, *Patriotic Education*.

14 See Curren and Metzger, *Living Well*.