EDUCATION AS A GUARDIAN DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE?

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I n this short paper, I aim to address the crisis in liberal democracy by examining the qualifier 'liberal' in contemporary understandings of democracy. I begin by first addressing the seemingly popular assumption that democracy is synonymous with liberal democracy. While the qualifier itself implies that there are multiple forms of democracy, I draw on some of my own recent experiences of living in China to illustrate that democracy is always articulated to ideological positions that are operationalised in different ways. From here, I question the extent to which liberal democracy is itself the crisis. In doing so, I question the desirability of seeking to recover, or defend liberal democracy. Finally, I suggest that developing practices that enable students to interrogate the politics of truth claims as part of negotiating the significant challenges currently facing the world may be more worthwhile.

Will the True Democracy Please Stand Up?

Those of us who have been educated in so-called western liberal democracies risk making too many assumptions about what democracy is. Owing to the dominant school curricula, Ancient Greece is likely to feature strongly in these assumptions. And when we consider that historical conceptions of democracy often fail to take into account intersections with geography, it is not surprising if a notion of Greek democracy - however flimsy this may be - acts as the benchmark against which all other claims to democracy are to be judged. Yet, is it justifiable for such western notions of democracy to act as the arbiters of true democracy in the contemporary world? In this essay, I make the argument that there can be no one 'benchmark' because democracy is necessarily contextual and contested. It is both historically and geographically differentiated.

Over thirty years ago, Edward Soja (1989) made the claim that "an essentially historical epistemology continues to pervade the critical consciousness of modern social theory" and that its hegemonic status "has tended to occlude a comparable critical sensibility to the spatiality of social life"

(10-11). Soja's work was an important contribution to the 'spatial turn' in the 1980s and '90s and its attempt to challenge the 'tyranny of history'. Edward Said's two essays on the idea of travelling theory (1983 and 2001) demonstrate that ideas cannot be thought of as essential. Instead, as they travel, ideas take on new shape and new meaning as they encounter new spaces of cultural politics. While historical notions take a temporal view of change, expressed as continuity and discontinuity, the kind of geographical reading proposed by Soja and Said allows for ideas to be changed through their interaction with the lived reality of social and political life *elsewhere*. The contested nature of democracy, framed historically, may lead us to acknowledge the reality that we can only ever discuss the many varieties of 'prefix-democracy' (Nyyssönen and Metsälä, 2021). However, without a sensibility to geography, it can be all too easy to assume that even such qualified notions of democracy mean the same thing everywhere.

To illustrate the geographical implications for a concept such as democracy, I think back to my first visit to

China. On arrival, I could not help but notice the immense amount of construction going on, especially apartment complexes. Moreover, of the seemingly endless concrete structures designed to house people, it appeared that many of these new apartment buildings didn't actually house anyone at all. As I sat in the taxi on the way from the airport to my destination, I noticed the fences which surround these construction areas. Seemingly ubiquitous, these long, flimsy-looking panels were adorned with images and words. Oftentimes, it was the Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on display. A reminder of what it is that lies at the foundation of all this 'progress'. Included amongst the values are 'justice', 'freedom' and 'democracy'. For an *outsider*, seeing these words proudly displayed may initially be jarring. Indeed, some 'westerners' scoff at such words being promoted by the CCP. To do so, however, is to fail to acknowledge that there is no absolute, pure, or fixed notion of democracy and nor is the western tradition the arbiter of that which counts as democracy.

Ought Liberal Democracy Be Saved?

I have found myself wondering if the assumption behind the proclamations of a crisis in liberal democracy is that a purer, older, form of liberal democracy needs to be restored. Perhaps the threat is from the outside, the crashing waves of illiberalism weakening democracy's very foundations. However, I can't help but think that even those who are scampering to recover liberal democracy believe that it has, in fact, come apart from the inside; that there is something internal to the liberal conception of democracy that is not quite right. Indeed, it may well be that democracy's articulation to liberalism itself is that which needs to be addressed, rather than simply assumed.

Returning to the *outside* of western history, this crisis of liberal democracy may well have been foreseen in China by Sun Yat Sen, as well as Mao and subsequent leaders of the CCP. According to the Marxist scholar, Arif Dirlik, Sun Yat Sen:

> was a confirmed believer in the value of competition as a motive force of development, but since he observed from the European experience that

unbridled competition created class division and conflict, he believed that socialism was necessary to keep in check the undesirable consequences of capitalism. His conception of socialism, in other words, did not require the repudiation of capitalism, only its control. (1989, 39)

Dirlik goes on to draw a connecting line between Sun's views about the relationship between socialism and capitalism and Mao's declaration of New Democracy as part of the peculiarly Chinese path of historical development towards communist social formations. Writing during the twilight years of Deng Xiaoping's (unofficial) reign as Paramount Leader of China, Dirlik notes that "the role socialism occupies in 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'", within the New Democracy formation, "is not that of immanent vision, pushing society further along the road to socialism, but of *ideological guardian*, to check the possibility of a slide into capitalism" (40, emphasis mine).

What this demonstrates is that democracy is shaped by ideological and, I suggest, moral framings. It is not only about political organisation. But socialism itself has changed

since the time of Sun, and of Mao and Deng. And if liberalism has acted as a guardian of 'western' democracy, then it is also worth thinking about the ways in which it has changed as the concept has traversed both time and space.

From (Neo)Liberal 'Guardian', to Practice of Democracy

There is, of course, no one reason as to why liberal democracy may be considered to be in crisis. However, it could be argued that the various liberal formations have led, as Wendy Brown (2019) states, to the rise of antidemocratic politics in the west. To make such a claim, we need to be clear about what kind of liberalism we are talking about. My intention here is not to enter the debates about the meanings of classical liberalism. However, in making a distinction between a liberalism with a bent towards individual freedom ('negative liberty') and a liberalism with a bent towards collective freedom ('positive liberty'), we are able to ask which of these has come to dominate the 'western

social imaginary'. In my view, it is the former and this, I suggest, is a problem.

One way of describing the crisis in liberal democracy might be to say that it has transformed into neoliberal democracy. While Brown makes the argument that "the liberalism in what has come to be called neoliberalism refers to liberalism's economic variant" (2019, 39), this risks minimising the role that the individualistic version of political liberalism has played in helping to bring about neoliberal democracies. Having said that, it could be reasonably argued that neoliberalism, as a rationality derived from economic liberalism, has successfully swallowed both the individualistic and collectivist strains of classical political liberalism. Given the prominence of 'New Deal' and 'European social welfare state' - manifestations of liberalism that took seriously the collective -during the mid- and, in some cases extending until, the late-20th century, Brown's narrative appears to make sense. Troublingly, Brown argues that "four decades of neoliberal rationality has resulted in a profoundly antidemocratic political culture" (86).

If all of this is the case, then the question becomes one of how it is that democracy can be imagined and practised under such conditions. What is it that will function as the ideological - perhaps even the moral - guardian of democracy? Simple answers will not do. It will not be good enough for educators to look to slogans or formulas for social justice. There exists an important task in all of this for education and educators to engage in the debates and the negotiations of what it means to live together. Education itself needs to be understood as constituting a set of critical practices, rather than understood as an institution, or simply being reduced to being an enabler of economic productivity. These critical practices entail the interrogation of the politics of truth claims, which takes us beyond what might be seen as a temptation in the contemporary 'hashtag' era to offer criticism as, or via, slogans. They will involve careful deliberation as to what is meant by truth and how to prioritise varying claims on freedom. These practices will include the struggle over which qualifier ought to act as the guardian of democracy. In other words, it is the practice of

democracy, not the particular concept of liberal democracy,

that needs to be saved.

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