

EDUCATION, INCLUSION,  
AND THE CRISIS IN  
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY:  
INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH  
AFRICA'S RECENT HISTORY

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The insurrection flagged in the title of this special issue refers to an almost surreal attempt by supporters of then President Trump to derail the certification in January 2021 by the US Congress of the election of his successor, Joe Biden. It could have been pantomime theatre, but for the fact that people died. This attempt to undermine the democratic process was one manifestation of what has been described as a broader crisis in liberal democracy. What is of more interest to me here – for the insights it offers to the central questions of this special issue – is another such manifestation, another insurrection.

In mid-July 2021, supporters of South Africa's former President, Jacob Zuma, mounted an insurrection in response to his being sent to prison for refusing to appear before a commission of inquiry established to investigate government corruption during his time as President. The insurrection took the shape most prominently of widely generalized looting, primarily in the provinces of KwaZulu Natal (Zuma's heartland) and Gauteng (South Africa's

economic hub). However, organized attacks on communications infrastructure, transport routes and supply and distribution networks marked the events as more than just looting of shops by the poor. It was an attempt by Zuma's supporters to weaken the government of Cyril Ramaphosa, his successor as President. South Africa's post-Apartheid constitution is hailed as among the most progressive in the world in the protections it provides for democratic processes, the rule of law, individual liberty, respect for the rights of persons and the tolerance of diversity. Yet here was an attempt to undermine democracy and the rule of law by members of the political party that had swept Nelson Mandela to power just a generation before.

Prior to South Africa's transition to a non-racial democracy in 1994 there were substantial debates among some opposition groups about how the Apartheid state and its economic, political and social structures were best understood. Liberal – as the term was used in South Africa at the time – opposition groups understood these structures primarily in terms of race: the governing National Party was

committed to the separation of people on the basis of the colour of their skin, and this resulted in inhumane discrimination against people of colour. Radical, or left wing – as these terms were used in South Africa at the time – opposition groups interpreted the structures of Apartheid primarily in terms of class: the governing National Party was committed ultimately to the preservation of white economic and political power and privilege, and Apartheid was not so much about horizontal separation between different ethnic groups as it was about vertical separation and the creation of a reservoir of cheap black labour. And so liberal interpretations of Apartheid were seen by many on the left as, to put it politely, unsatisfactory. Liberalism was not held in high regard, given its all too easy association with capitalist economic structures, by the left, who understood Apartheid in terms of capitalist economic structures. ‘Grand Apartheid’ created ‘homelands’ for South Africa’s different ethnic groups, uprooted communities from their homes and dumped them in those homelands, often hundreds of miles away, on land that was frequently too arid to support them, forcing men into taking jobs in

mines that were, again, far from their 'homeland'. 'Grand Apartheid' created an education system that was designed, through the selective allocation of resources, to fail black students early in their school career, so that they had no choice but to seek jobs as manual labourers in mines, on farms and in factories – means of production held solely in white hands. The left placed its faith in socialist economic structures, in a social democracy, decrying liberal democracy as something of a sell-out.

Now, some forty years later, when we see the threats to liberal democracy the world over, we've realized that the liberal democratic principles we might have decried as merely justification for exploitative capitalist economies, constitute in fact the very air that we breathe – in those liberal democracies, anyway. We've always taken for granted the individual freedoms and tolerance associated with liberalism, the freedom of speech and of the press associated with ensuring transparency – so important in helping to ensure, in turn, accountability. We've always taken for granted the rule of law associated with democracy, itself in turn dependent on liberalism's fundamental

principle of individual autonomy and the associated right, expressed in the democratic process, to recall abusive, corrupt or inept governments. So the principles underpinning a liberal democracy constitute now a *sine qua non* of the kind of society that we seek constantly to build and to strengthen, even if in South Africa in the 1980s we weren't that enamoured with the liberal part of that, in our focus on a radical, class-based interpretation of Apartheid.

Now we see, when the institutions of a liberal democracy are flouted or absent, what the consequences are: 342 dead in South Africa's July 2021 insurrection; a pandemic that may have killed more than 18 million so far (in the modelling of *The Economist*) and devastated the lives and livelihoods of countless millions more, primarily because an initial lack of transparency and an associated attempt to hide its outbreak contributed to its spinning out of control and spreading globally; governments in Eastern Europe hobbling the judiciary's capacity to review the constitutionality of government legislation and action; Turkey's government building an increasingly illiberal state and reversing gains in women's rights; governments in

Western Europe moving further to the right to counter the rise of populist, nationalist and anti-immigration parties whose doctrines are in the end simply racist; Russia's Putin and Belarus's Lukashenko crushing dissent mercilessly; India's Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party so committed to Hindu nationalism that they allow massively crowded Hindu cultural festivals to go ahead and so speed the spread of the Covid-19 Delta variant in that country with thousands dead as a consequence; and the woeful and pernicious consequences – too many to list here – of the Trump administration, not just in the USA, but globally. Without the foundational principles of a liberal democracy permeating national constitutions, countries are set on a slippery slope to right-wing authoritarianism, with its threats to the rule of law, its abuse of citizens' individual rights and freedoms, its intolerance of diversity and abuse of those who are different, and the blurring of the lines separating legislature, executive and judiciary and the consequent concentration of power, lack of transparency and risk of corruption, ineptitude and abuse.

What role can education play in addressing this crisis in liberal democracy? An obvious answer is enhanced citizenship education that steeps young people in the principles of liberalism and democracy, that enhances their commitment to building and protecting societal institutions founded in these principles. I want to argue, however, that although education for liberal democracy is essential – again, the *sine qua non* of any citizenship education curriculum – stronger responses lie in an education for social democracy as well, on top of an education steeped in liberalism across the curriculum. Why? Because a commitment to the principles of social democracy entails a commitment to a more equitable distribution of societal goods. Educators need to identify “the axes along which educational and other goods are differentially distributed” (Mason, 2014, p. 257) – the most common axes being socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability and location – and to address policy and practice at redress of the unfair distribution of goods along these axes.

Ultimately, a commitment to a more equitable distribution of societal goods is what underlies an education

for inclusion. And that is the most substantial educational response to the crisis in liberal democracy that I want to offer here. Not stopping at an education committed to liberalism and democracy. Nor at an education committed to the principles and practice of social democracy, built on and assuming in the first instance the prior values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of difference. But an education that is ultimately committed to inclusion, so that all feel that they have a stake in society, and in fact do. UNESCO sees this as so important that it focused its 2020 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on inclusion, titling it *Inclusion and education: all means all* (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusion is not only right and fair. It is not only one of the strongest defences against the corrosion of liberal democracy. Its denial is what in part led to the looting that rocked South Africa in July this year. Yes, it was a faction loyal to Jacob Zuma that fomented an insurrection aimed at weakening the government of Cyril Ramaphosa. But the scale of the looting that followed probably surprised even the most cynical of the insurrectionists. It should have been no

surprise, however, to those who can see the degree of exclusion that persists in South Africa, even a quarter century after the formal end of Apartheid. Exclusion is probably the greatest threat to liberal democracy. And education for inclusion is the strongest response we have.

But combatting exclusion is not the work of educators alone. Economic, political and social structures need to be changed, along with educational policies and practices, to ensure more inclusive societies. Because time is short. Lines are being drawn across the world, between those countries committed to the principles of liberalism and democracy, and those governments focused on corroding them and arrogating ever greater degrees of power to the centre. And once liberal democracy's corresponding political structures are corroded to collapse, they are very difficult to rebuild. Ensuring the resilience of economic, political and social structures founded in liberalism and democracy and committed to inclusive societies is the task of future citizens. And educating these future citizens for a deep commitment to liberal democracy and inclusion is our critical responsibility now.

## References

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