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SOCIAL EDUCATION AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE: TOWARDS BUILDING DEMOCRACY AS A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

Glenn Varona, MPol&Admin
Flinders University of South Australia

Democracy is arguably facing a difficult challenge during these present times. If democracy could be defined as a system of governance where citizens are allowed to play some meaningful part in the management of public affairs (Chomsky, 1992: 331), a large measure of the challenge rests on this basic premise. That citizens could actually play a meaningful part in the management of public affairs has been put to task time and again. It is possible to see increasingly widening gaps between citizens and their elected leaders and representative institutions even in the most developed democracies in the world, as citizens are seen as uninformed, irrational, or indifferent to public matters (Mathews, 1994: 66). Indeed, the question has been raised whether citizens are 'expert' enough at dealing with the complex issues involved in public policy. The reasoning is that if 'professional' policy makers in government frequently encounter enough problems arriving at consensus on difficult policy matters, the involvement of 'amateur' citizens would only needlessly complicate matters further (Peters, 2001: 59-60). The issue, then, could be seen as a matter of determining whether citizens have the requisite competence to participate meaningfully in public affairs, as competence is a necessary quality that anyone involved in governance should possess in order to make effective public policy decisions (Gaventa, 1999 cited in Varona, 2006: 6).

However, there is an arguably greater challenge to democratic governance as it is here defined. Neo-liberalism has brought into present-day democracy consequences that have had adverse effects on the manner by which democratic polities function, particularly on the nature of the relationships between citizens and the state. Neo-liberalism is an economic theory premised on the idea that the human being is basically and fundamentally a pragmatic and rational economic creature.

Rationality is little more than the ability to choose the most appropriate means of attaining one's goals, that is, the human economic creature seeks the most efficient means of attaining his or her ends (Goodin, 1976: 9). This runs against the Enlightenment tradition that rationality is broad, deep, well defined, and independent of context (Flyvberg, 1998: 2).

Taking the level of analysis higher, society is essentially composed of people seeking to maximise their respective gains from everyone and everything else. This is an offshoot of Neo-liberal thinking called, 'Rational Choice' Theory, which assumes that human beings, as political, social, and economic actors, are essentially self-centred, utility maximising individuals whose motive is self-interest (Bell, 2002: 369). Society becomes a market system where supply and demand are the only operative forces, since it is in a market environment that the self-interested individual could seek to maximise gains at the least possible costs. What is to be produced and how it is to be produced are best left to the market. Human rationality in this sense is reduced to mere instrumental rationality (Heath, 2003: 2).

Neo-liberals argue that government's role in such a context is to allow the market free rein in giving people what they want. Indeed, the government's role is so minimal, it is not even allowed to intervene in the event of a market failure. Furthermore, people are given individual freedom to the degree that they are allowed to live according to their idea of what is good, so long as they do no harm to others (Argy, 1998: 54-55). In the desire to make democratic society more free, neo-liberals have made it little more than a commodity market involving people who look at democratic life only for its use value, maximising personal liberties and applying political participation with a view towards increasing individual mass consumption (Habermas, 1989: 191-192). These have merely served to make people consumers of public services and the fruits of democracy instead of developing substantial citizenship with its attendant responsibilities. This is the irresponsible promulgation of rights and liberties without counterpart obligations (O'Neill, 2002: 18). Hence, this is the greater challenge to democratic life, as it undermines the essence of democracy in replacing public responsibility with mere economic rationality.

To Aristotle (in Mansbridge, 1999: 295-296), substantial citizenship involves people who deliberate, judge, and take turns in public office looking after the interests of the community. Indeed, citizenship should be much more than a legal definition of one's political status in relation to the state. In its most ideal sense, citizens are not just users and consumers of public goods, but movers and shapers of the future, benefiting not just themselves, but also their fellow citizens (Beer, 1974 & Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999 & 2001 cited in McIntyre, 2004:

39). This paper argues that political and technical competence in governance could be possible through social education, which in turn could be achieved through the development of social dialogue with which people could actively participate in public decision making. Dialogue of this kind could open the way towards democratic deliberation and allow people to become citizens who could promote their interests, hold their governments in check and collectively solve problems (Young, 2002: 6). This social education is not necessarily formal in character, but is the product of actual meaningful participation in public decision-making. Hence, it is practical education towards developing the competence necessary for effective governance. It is hoped that such social education, if actualised, could make possible the actualisation of democracy as a public philosophy as understood in Wintrop (2000).

Democracy as Public Philosophy

When a democratic system includes all of the formal democratic institutions and procedures but with little or no actual and meaningful citizen participation, this is merely formal democracy. Democracy as public philosophy includes the formal institutions and procedures as well as the substantial and effective participation of its citizens in the management of public affairs (Wintrop, 2000: 3). Indeed, it is what happens when democratic practice has spread throughout society, when both institutions and authorities work together in a rich fabric representing and sustaining a vast diversity of interests (Fox, 1990: 2). It could be said that democracy has become a public philosophy when citizens have internalised democratic theory and practice, acting accordingly as the primary holders of public office and public responsibility (Mathews, 1994: 3). It has become a public philosophy when citizens have so internalised the principles of democratic life and actualise them in willing the common good (Mansbridge, 1999: 299). Therefore, every citizen in a democracy, if it is to be public philosophy is a political theorist, philosopher, and actor. In this regard, every citizen is, in Aristotle's term (cited in Voegelin, 1952: 64), a *spoudaios,* a person who has actualised to the fullest possible level the potentialities of his or her nature, able to live the virtuous life by habit. Ideally, every citizen constitutes a public, which is what a democratically constituted deliberative body of citizens could be termed (Mathews, 1994: 5).

This is not saying that citizens, acting together to work out public policy, replace the constitutional state. Rather, democracy should ideally empower people, not so much to oppose established political and public institutions, but rather to allow them to be involved and act as stakeholders working towards the realisation of what they deem to be their destiny. This may require the reinvention of existing state

institutions, but not their abolition (Wainwright, 2003: 41). Indeed, democracy as an institution requires stability, and by definition, an institution comprises organizations and procedures that acquire and maintain value and stability (Goodin, 1996: 22). If citizens were to hold a stake in their future, then it is not unreasonable to assume that an abiding characteristic of a democratic polity should be stability.

Here, however, arises the issue of competence. If one were to assume that citizens ought to act as the primary mover and shaper of a democracy, following the public philosophic view, then one must ask the question of how it could be possible to build competence in people, enabling them to act meaningfully as citizens. If the role of education in this context is one of making meaningful citizenship possible, then the role of education, particularly social education that is not necessarily confined to formal academic settings, is to allow people to become competent citizens; Aristotle's *Spoudaioi*. The issue in hand now then, is, how is it possible to make a society of *spoudaioi*?

Democratic Participation as Social Education

Theory, including political theory, is not mere opinion. It is an attempt at understanding the meaning of existence through the avenue of reason and experience (Voeglin, 1952: 64). Theory, therefore, is part of knowledge, for knowledge is the perception of the relationships and patterns of relationships between and among ideas, as understood in Locke (1964: 320). Knowledge is acquired through education, learned through experience, following Locke's empiricist view, in order to prepare the human being for the manifold duties attendant on people as members of society and the world (Frost, 1962: 219). Hence, it is possible to draw from these concepts the idea that, for people to be meaningful members of society, and by extension political beings, there is a need for social and political education of the kind that could enable people to carry out their duties toward society and the world. In the context of democratic life, people should arguably be educated towards becoming citizens, requiring an expansion of social consciousness (Heron, 2002: 333). The importance of this could not be overstated, for at present, the increasing complexity of society has caused the scope for responsibility, including social and public responsibility, to contract, while simultaneously, the human being is flooded with too much information and stimuli, not all of which are relevant to the human essence (Habermas, 1989: 34-35).

Perhaps it could be said that formal education of the kind that is found in universities and other formally constituted educational institutions could answer this requirement. Taking from Habermas (1989: 101), the university is ideally an institution that defines and establishes a form of life, indeed, life of an exemplary form that people

within the institution share intersubjectively. Then again, formal university education is something that not everyone could attain. Does it mean, therefore, that only people able to secure university placement or some similar kind of formal education could become citizens in a democratic society? If so, then the democratic franchise would be limited only to what would arguably be a small minority in society. But if democracy is premised on the idea that its normative legitimacy depends on the degree to which those affected by the decisions of its policy makers are included in the making of these decisions and are able to influence the outcomes (Young, 2002: 5-6), then such a limited franchise would violate this premise. Therefore, education for citizenship could not possibly be confined only to that part of society able to secure the benefits of formal education. After all, it is possible to argue that government under a formally educated elite with little effective public participation for everyone else would marginalise and alienate the very people who should be contributing to the actualisation of democratic society. People in today's times arguably desire involvement in the manner by which they are governed (Mathews, 1994: 24). Therefore, social education towards citizenship should go beyond formal schooling. Intersubjectivity in the sense of Habermas (1984, 1989 & 2005) could be possible in a social setting external to classrooms and ivy-covered academic halls. Education could transcend formal academia and become a social and public activity.

Alexis de Tocqueville believed that direct democracy, that is, popular participation in managing public affairs, could actually build a people's character, since allowing people to participate in the exercise of power would develop a concern for the common good (Mansbridge, 1999: 303). Indeed, the empowerment of people in this context is inseparable from democratic politics (Wainwright, 2003: 37). But the central issue of popular participation is the distribution of power (Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994: 4). Indeed, what constitutes knowledge is frequently a decision based on power (McIntyre, 2004: 41). Power, as it is understood in Foucault (1980) and in Gaventa (1999) is intimately linked with knowledge, and power in this context refers not so much to the punitive sense but rather, to the ability to create and develop. Power is seen as constructive, allowing people to understand themselves and the issues surrounding them (Gaventa, 1999: 57). The critical role of social education, then, as derived from popular participation, is the development and establishment of a civic consciousness in people that would allow them to make collective decisions and broaden each person's conception of his or her interests (Mansbridge, 1999: 292). Thus, it is possible to argue that people, given this opportunity towards social education through the practical political experience of democratic participation, could learn to be responsible for themselves and for others.

This is arguably building political competence. Ordinary people, after all, are possibly endowed with creativity and knowledge (McIntyre, 2004: 39), and social education could be the means by which this vast but arguably underemployed reservoir of creativity could be put to use.

If democratic participation were to be the citizens' mentor toward political competence, then such an education has to have something on which it could be based. Civic engagement as part of popular participation in democratic governance could be this basis. Civic engagement starts from social communication. Therefore, there is the need to build mechanisms through which public deliberation could be actualised. After all, democracy requires free and informed dialogue (Coker, 1934: 373). Dialogue is the closest people could get to the attainment of contextual truth. After all, it is the only means by which different ideas and perspectives could be shared and collectively tested (McIntyre, 2004: 41). Dialogue, in turn, begins as social communication, for if democratic citizens are to work toward a collective and contextually constructed future, then there is need for avenues for social communication (Habermas, 1984: 274). Social communication should ideally lead to emancipation when conducted within an atmosphere of mutual understanding (Jackson, 2000: 32). This would require that everyone participating in the processes of social communication be considered ethically equal to everyone else, since without this equality, understanding could not possibly arise out of relations of inequality. Ethical equality leads to civic equality, which is the basis of practical democratic dialogue (Habermas, 2005: 8).

Out of social communication could arise civic engagement and ultimately, civic consciousness where people as citizens could work through problems and issues, learning in the process on the basis of letting the strength of the better argument prevail (Fishkin, 1999: 283). Dialogue and civic engagement could lead to the establishment of an expanded social consciousness, which could lead to the development of social cooperation and trust, which are, in turn, predicated on the existence of openness and tolerance. Social education could possibly lead to the development of the ability of people to see into each other's differing situations and circumstances. After all, democratic dialogue, civic engagement, social cooperation, and trust depend on a culture of tolerance that involves the sharing of beliefs and ideas regarding solutions to everyday social problems (Wintrop, 2000: 200).

For all intents and purposes, this description of democracy as dialogue between and among citizens and between citizens and existing public institutions could be defined as governance. Governance is distinguished from government, in that the latter is a formal institution, while the former is a broader concept that includes forms of governing that may be external to formal government (Hughes, 2003: 76).

Governance could arguably involve learning, both as an individual and collective social endeavour. Learning in this context ideally enables experience and competence to enlarge citizen consciousness, which is essential if democratic governance is to work (Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994: 7). In this conceptualisation, the public interest emerges through the establishment of processes that enhance the rights of citizens to determine policies they believe appropriate to themselves (Peters, 2001: 72-73). It is possible to hope that by this means, citizens are able to make use of democratic governance as both an instrument for their own education, emancipation and empowerment as much as a means of designing public policy.

Governance could, in the tradition of Habermas, become an instrument whereby citizens could establish a unified theory of meaning and action (Davidson cited in Heath, 2003: 19) in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. Thus, governance as a learning process could allow people, acting as citizens to be competent while empowering themselves to deal with obstacles to progress together (Heron, 2002: 333). Then, perhaps, it would eventually be possible to call citizens in a democracy *spoudaioi*.

Building Democracy into a Public Philosophy: The Philosopher's Role

The question now is how to make participatory democratic governance an educative mechanism to allow people to become active citizens. In line with the concepts under consideration in this paper, it is perhaps possible to actualise educative governance and active citizenship through the establishment of learning communities. If democratic governance is to facilitate the development of a critical consciousness in people so as to allow them to critically examine their policy decisions and choices (Gaventa, 1999: 58), this is arguably through the idea of the establishment of learning communities. Where citizens work together in community, there exists a learning community. It is a social setting where citizens could work together with existing government institutions, or independently in the event of government failure or inaction, as stakeholders making decisions for the common good, improving the quality of life, and learning as they go so to increase their capacity for governance (Soltan, 1999: 12).

Philosophers and philosophy could play the leading role in this public education. Philosophy is a way of thinking in its purest and simplest definition. As differentiated from science, which is also a way of thinking, philosophical thought is not usually confined to any specific domain. Indeed, in seeking truth, it has unlimited referents, allowing the mind to explore the widest possible context which the philosopher is capable of envisaging (Hutchison, 1977: 9 & 10). The light of knowledge that philosophy provides is capable of understanding almost anything,

able to direct the mind into the search for understanding (Locke, 1964: 63). Political society, particularly democratic society, needs theoretical bases on which to build and interpret transcendent truths, and this is the critical junction where politics meets philosophy (Voegelin, 1952: 1). If democratic governance is to be educative and emancipating, then it stands to reason that those who seek to make this real should ground their efforts on fundamental theory, clearly within the realm of philosophy and the philosopher.

The task of the philosopher is therefore clear. The philosopher has the role of providing the theoretical underpinnings of the processes of governance as education, thus defining the terms of the expected resulting dialogue. Furthermore, he could provide the means of facilitating dialogue if it is to become the mechanism towards social education for effective citizenship. Participation in democratic dialogue necessarily involves the development of the ability to think systemically if such participation is to become social education. By systems thinking is meant the ability of people to think about their interests and roles beyond themselves and their narrow contexts. Instead, they should develop an understanding of the consequences, both good and bad, of their actions and decisions on the system of which they are a part (Stacey, 2003: 103-104). Taking from Kierkegaard (cited in Habermas, 1989: 260, 261), education ideally allows the individual to decide as a moral individual to assume responsibility for his or her life history, which would naturally have a profound impact on others in society and the public sphere. The personal self is simultaneously the social self as well as the public self, ergo, a citizen (Habermas, 1989: 261).

Democratic society is arguably a very complex system, indeed a critical system, which is to say that everything in a democratic system is related in some way to everything else. It is not always possible to understand everything and apprehend all of the relationships in such complexity, hence the need for dialogue of the kind that requires minds open to any and all ideas and a readiness to engage with complexity (McIntyre, 2004: 40-41). The ability to facilitate thinking in such an open and liberal manner is arguably within the purview of the philosopher. Equally important, systemic thinking necessarily involves reflection in action (Schon cited in Checkland & Scholes, 1990: 277). Reflective thought is also essential to the philosophic discipline. Hence, it could be said that philosophy and its practitioners would make outstanding guides to thinking and action in the educative processes of systems thinking in democratic participation.

The ultimate objective of democracy in the public philosophic perspective is arguably to make democratic practice broad and deep, as understood in Wintrop (2000). Thus, the philosopher has the ultimate and extremely vital task of translating the complex concepts that will

almost certainly arise in the attempt to share ideas and worldviews. Furthermore, when issues of power arise, it is almost beyond question that such issues become questions of ethics, and what better understanding of ethics is there apart from the philosophical?

In contrast to Neo-liberalism and Rational Choice, a public philosophic view of democratic governance begins with the question that is essentially historical institutionalist in character: 'What is the appropriate response to a situation given a person's position and responsibilities?' (Bell, 2002: 371). Democratic life presupposes individual rights and liberties, which in turn presuppose individual duties and obligations to everyone and everything else. Thus, citizens in a democracy should learn to build the ethical capacity to think and act in terms of what should be done and who should do it, rather than thinking only about personal benefit (O'Neill, 2002: 32). In Habermas (cited in Heath, 2003: 2-3), the idea of reconciling the rational with the normative aspects of economic thought and social action respectively allows for the maintenance of rational economic principles in society without leaving it a moral vacuum. Hence, ethical capacity is built among people since it would no longer be necessary to see morality as non-rational if by rational, one does not look at it in an instrumental sense. Whether it be Kant's Categorical Imperatives, Weber's values, or Parsons' norms, it is possible to argue that such non-instrumental forms of rationality are seen as inclusive of publicly shared reasons for action that are part of people's deliberative processes (Heath, 2003: 2, 14). In so doing, it does not become necessary to exclude instrumental reason, underpinning utility maximising actions, from the ethics of citizenship in a meaningful democracy. This would be a social lesson that would be hard to absorb socially without philosophers to guide it through.

Perhaps it is time for philosophers to look at themselves not so much as philosopher-kings of the Platonic tradition, nor as mere academics locked away in theoretical ivory towers, but rather as modern day manifestations of Confucius, Mencius, Socrates, or even of Elijah and Isaiah of Old Testament times. The philosopher as educator could be a teacher to society and a professor of democratic participation and active citizenship. As such, philosophers of modern times could act as catalysts for change in the way of organisers and facilitators of the establishment of learning communities within which civic education and engagement could become possible. It is not wrong to assume that a philosopher is first and foremost a teacher, and that philosophy, being a way of thinking, is an educational tool. Could it be possible to extend that definition to include the philosopher as a facilitator of social change and social education? After all, the end point of all philosophical inquiry as well as education is to foster understanding upon which human action and endeavour could work towards actual fulfilment and meaning.

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