**Beyond Critique: Some Problems in the Analysis of Educational Philosophy and Action**

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**Abstract**

*To the critical philosopher the system of popular education has historically failed. Although the adherent of deliberative democracy may disagree with the Marxist over the cause of its failure, both would find fault with the system’s inability to realise educational principles. However, the actual construction and administration of popular educational systems from the nineteenth century to the present have concerned themselves very little with the principles of the theorist. Following the civil philosophy of Ian Hunter, this paper seeks to explore the history and perpetuation of this divide between theory and praxis towards a re-evaluation of critical educational methodology –– one that includes criticism of the comportment of the critic herself.*

Keywords: democracy, education, praxis, Hunter

The concepts ‘education’ and ‘democracy’ are as ancient as the Athenian *polis*. It is no surprise that modern theorists of education invoke the notion of *paideia* in analyzing the current state of democratic pedagogy. For example, Ingerid Straume hopes for a more emancipatory education in which the subject imaginatively determines the organization of society collectively (Straume, 2014). For Straume this collective process depends upon a certain formation of the self –– one grounded in the radical philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis whereby *paideia* is equated with the eighteenth century notion of *Bildung* (Straume, 2014). Despite differences in technique, her view is not entirely dissimilar to Henry Giroux’s who advances a utopian project towards ‘educated hope (Giroux, 2003).’ For Giroux, ‘any politics of hope must tap into individual experiences while at the same time linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social agency (Giroux, p. 100).’

Straume and Giroux criticize popular education for failing to live up to principles of democracy –– principles that have remained external to the school’s purview since its inception. Indeed, the critical theorist of education defines herself by means of her distance from the historical operation of the school. In this paper, I aim to show that the legacy of theory has more to do with the comportment of the theorist rather than the object of her criticism. In order to do so, I will paint in broad strokes the historical landscape of the school and the critical theorist’s reaction to it. In particular, I will borrow heavily from Ian Hunter’s civil philosophy in tracing the history of the intersection of the concepts ‘education’ and ‘democracy’ with the concept of ‘modernity.’ In so doing, I hope to reveal that the theorist routinely misreads history and politics –– in fact, she attempts to transcend them both, thus avoiding meaningful political engagement. Following this historical overview I will compare political and educational programmes of theorists who are currently en vogue –– notably Jürgen Habermas, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Giorgrio Agamben, and Cornelius Castoriadis. Through this comparison I intend to highlight problems in the relationship between theory and praxis in the sphere of education and to evaluate the importance of political history if theorists are to overcome their adherence to moral high-ground towards a less principled understanding of state schooling (Hunter, 1993; Hunter 1994).

It is impossible to discuss education and democracy without addressing John Dewey’s seminal work (Dewey, 1916). Dewey’s treatment of education and democracy are central to his pragmatism, which is particularly relevant to this study with regard to Dewey’s reading of history and politics to which I will return below. Before endeavouring to analyse the relationship between the state and the school as well as Dewey’s role therein, it seems necessary to define the idea of sovereignty, or at the very least to locate its origins historically. Commonly, sovereignty is equated with the state itself and since this paper is concerned with state schooling, an attempt to distinguish the idea of statehood from sovereignty is paramount. In truth sovereignty’s structure is state-bound, meaning its domain is territorial in that it concerns a particular place and population. However, sovereignty is a power ‘to do’ or ‘to act’ on a grand scale. Philosophers from Althusser to Agamben regard the state in totalizing terms. For them, sovereignty is the exercise of state power. It is all-encompassing and nefariously aligned. In contrast, Foucault regards sovereignty as a particular construct in a broader moral economy –– one which is both a thread in the moral economy’s web and an attempt to master it (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 13).’ Reinhart Koselleck, Ian Hunter, and Quentin Skinner among others identify the sovereign as a particular historical development the inheritance of which is the very foundation of public law. For these historians of philosophy, the sovereign is the neutral body that served as an arbiter between violent religious sects whose competing truth claims led to protracted and devastating civil war across Europe for over a century at the dawn of the modern era. In fact, modernity itself can be defined by the development of sovereignty as a territorially-bound peace-keeping project in the face of religious strife. Thus, sovereignty can be viewed as the structure of power –– what Spionza described as *potestas*, or the power to act (Loughlin, 2010). This definition of sovereignty as structure is in contrast to *potentia*, the exercise of power itself. Michael Mann equates *potentia* with infrastructural power the definition of which mirrors Foucault’s description of *gouvernmentalité* (Mann, 1984). One of the aims of this paper is to illustrate that the school, as an extension of infrastructural power, invariably serves sovereign interests, but the sovereign is rarely able to exert total control over its administration as the state depends on existing technologies at its disposal. Even if infrastructural power is generative, its deployment still relies on pre-existing resources. To think otherwise is to deny political reality and to dwell in utopian escapism –– something the theorist is frequently apt to do so long as her comportment as theorist is protected.

Critics of education from Gintis and Bowles to Ken Robinson deride the school as an industrial behemoth that limits the student’s ability to flourish as a self-determining subject. In this light, the school is either a capitalist construct that inhibits collective self-realisation or an outdated relic that hinders individual *eudaimonia*. To Gintis and Bowles, a more principled model of state schooling would elicit the democratic ideals that Marx promised them as a universally shared rational choice. For Robinson, the tectonic school needs a parametric makeover because the hierarchically monolithic technology of the ‘chalk and talk’ era hinders individual development whereas a more dynamic and lateral-minded twenty-first-century school will surely unshackle it. Ian Hunter has persuasively shown that both the Marxist and the self-help cheerleader depend on similar resources to realize their vision for a reformed school. What Hunter describes as ‘pastoral bureaucracy’ is necessary in both counts (Hunter, 1993; Hunter, 1994). Because not every student arrives on the first day of school with the same outlook, experiences, and capacities, the teacher historically acts as a shepherd in guiding her flock to the ends that Bowles, Gintis, and Robinson envision. Even the most optimistic of Marxists must concede that some teenagers will “irrationally” choose something that looks very unlike participative self-actualisation –– a reality to which any high school teacher can attest. It would seem that certain theorists are intent on advancing the notion that with the removal of “certain obstacles” each student will realize a potential that is steeped in a shared moral comportment –– one that looks suspiciously like the theorist’s.

According to Hunter, ‘the capacity for self-determining ethical conduct emerged from the dissemination of certain ethical institutions and practices, rather than from a timeless moral personality (Hunter, 1993, p. 256).’ These ethical institutions and practices to which Hunter refers have a tradition with a very particular starting point. Indeed, Hunter identifies the emergence of Protestantism as the most significant ‘system of pastoral discipline aimed at forming the capacity for individual ethical self-regulation (Hunter, 1993, p. 256).’ Because of Protestantism’s unique ability to assist the state with effective technologies for managing the self, sociologists such as Philip Gorski identify Protestantism –– in particular Calvinism –– as the driving force behind state formation (Gorski, 2003). However, this is a misreading of history. It is the violence with which Protestants and Catholics defended their truth claims throughout Europe that contributed to the formation of the modern state rather than any particular ideology from one of its warring sects. The sovereign leader may have strong religious convictions, but they must be bracketed for the sake of civil order.

Calvinism certainly contributed significantly to the administration of the modern state, but it is the state’s ability to act neutrally between the competing truth claims of Lutherans, Catholics, and Calvinists that defined its formation in the modern sense. In this reading of history, statecraft is the result of legal casuistry rather than the realisation of moral principles.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, James Van Horn Melton has shown that it was Lutheran Pietists employed by the authority of Calvinist administrators in Hohenzollern Prussia that inaugurated the compulsory primary school (Melton, 1988). Early statehood was fragile. The Calvinists depended on Lutherans for the pastoral management of Prussia’s young subjects. Van Horn Melton reminds us that schools are grounded in political negotiations over the maintenance of civil order rather than any particular theory or principle. Individual teachers may be the holders of very strong moral convictions that they instill in their students, but this should be viewed more as a particular technology in shepherding the student flock from one end of school to the other rather than a programme of indoctrination however intrusive the moral assertions of the teacher-shepherd.

Melton’s historical lesson frequently falls on the theorist’s deaf ears. For example, Amy Gutmann asserts that the interests of disadvantaged minorities are historically protected by democratic bodies (Gutmann, 1987; Hunter, 1993, p. 258). There are several reasons to disagree with her. Firstly, Gutmann assumes that education is universally a priority for disadvantaged minorities. This has not a claim one can make unconditionally. It may be true that a majority of ex-slaves in reconstruction America wanted access to education, but towards what end and by whose delivery? Universal claims at the expense of context are mere ‘thought games’ and ignore the historical reality that the only education available to a black southerner in mid-nineteenth century America was actually quite undesirable to many (Anderson, 1988). Disadvantaged minorities have historically gained access to education not by democratic means but as a political concession by state authorities who offer a decisively nondemocratic education. More commonly, disadvantaged groups have had state education thrusted upon them as was the case in seventeenth century Prussia. Gutmann assumes that the school ought to realize fundamental principles as a condition of the rational moral comportment of every living subject. It eludes her that such a moral outlook may be the particular view of university academics such as herself. Because there is no guarantee that disadvantaged minorities would democratically decide to conduct their education in a manner that Amy Gutmann deems morally worthy, theorists such as herself must concede that predominantly racist or sexist communities would benefit from some nondemocratic authority when building a moral curriculum in harmony with the theorist’s –– something the pastoral bureaucracy of the actual, historical school is well-equipped to manage (Hunter, 1993). However, the pastoral bureaucracy rarely consults the theorist in matters of moral concern. The school employs those with strong moral outlooks to shepherd flocks of students from kindergarten through high school, but avoids basing its programme on well-defined theoretical principles. Rather, its programme is defined by an ability to manage and organize state subjects towards the maintenance of civil order –– a goal only the anarchist hopes to abandon.

Theorists such as Henry Giroux regard neoliberalism’s appropriation of these technologies as a violation of universal principles. Before entertaining Giroux’s critique it is necessary to scrutinize the appeal to universal ideals such as human rights. Richard Rorty, as contentious as figure as he is, has offered very persuasive arguments against the notion that ‘political authority should be grounded in particular moral identities (Hunter, 2000, p. 59).’ What I hope to show is that this is true of education as well. Rorty contends that any advancement of human rights must be based on group solidarity. Such a position is an expression of the liberal tradition –– that is, a human rights culture –– rather than a fundamentally shared human condition (Rorty, 1993). To Rorty, it is misguided to seek any metaphysical principle on which to defend human rights because their violation divides groups into human and monster –– categories that human rights advocates seek to abolish. Rather, Rorty is concerned with protecting human difference and influencing those who would be categorized as monsters to be more humane by means of a sentimental education (Rorty, 1993). Again, Ian Hunter’s civil philosophy is useful in analyzing Rorty’s attack on moral high-mindedness for it reveals not only the strength of Rorty’s position, but it’s ultimate short-comings as well. His mistake, according to Ian Hunter, is to assume that the protection of human difference, or toleration, is contingent on the adoption of liberal democracy as its precondition (Hunter, 2000; Rorty, 1991). History has shown that it is not liberal democracy alone that breeds tolerance. It is the establishment of a neutral sovereign body –– one that is historically non-democratic –– that has been successful in maintaining mostly tolerant civil order. Liberal democracy emerged from this tradition –– not the other way around.

Recent discourse on cosmopolitanism and education echoes Rorty’s stance. It would appear that one must live in a liberal democracy in order to qualify as a cosmopolitan citizen (McDonough, 2003). But tolerance is not only seen as a programme exclusive to postmodern liberalism, it is also evoked as a universal moral principle. Economist Jeremy Rifkin seeks genetic proof of human tolerance as hallmark of civilization (Rifkin, 2009). To Rifkin, empathy is hard-wired in our DNA. Even if his assertion is correct that we all share an empathic gene, we certainly don’t universally apply it. Its development can only materialize in conduct, which is undoubtedly the domain of pastoral pedagogy. Whether it be through organisations such as Facing History and Ourselves who seek to impart in students the complexity of our ‘universe of obligation’ or some other culturally sensitive curriculum, schools do not assume that the capacity for empathy reveals itself to students as a rational epiphany: it is taught.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rather than regard tolerance as a universal principle in a shared moral personality, it would be useful to explore its origin as a form of conduct necessary for the maintenance of civil order. This conduct has historically been the concern of pedagogy more than it has genetic science. James Tully has outlined four problems of governability in the early modern period: ‘The first three problems were how to govern the laboring classes; what form of rule would end the civil and religious wars that swept Europe for 100 years and claimed 30 per cent of the population; and how to administer global relations of commercial exploitation, colonization, and military power. The fourth problem provided the means to organize the other three into an overall political strategy (Tully, 1993, p. 14).’ Organizing the poor took a while. The governing of the laboring classes was a chief concern of the early modern state. As churches across Europe struggled to maintain governance of the poor, the state increasingly sought alternative means to manage labourers and vagrants. Workhouses were one solution. Schools were another, but states resisted commitment to their funding. As mentioned above, Prussia was innovative in its adoption of a compulsory system of education. It cannot be stressed enough that this system was by no means a response to democratic demands. The concept of popular education would not intersect with the idea of democracy for another century. In fact, democracy was hardly uttered across Europe except derisively until well after the dust settled following the French Revolution. It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that democracy and education had any relationship whatsoever.

The concept of ‘education’ intersected with the concept ‘democracy’ only when it was politically advantageous for proponents of both ideas to do so. For example, in England the push for democracy was utilitarian and religious in origin, though not universally so. Nor was it a surge from the ground up as historicist views are keen to describe. Rather, the position for democracy in nineteenth century England was a political one rather than a principled one. While politicians frequently invoke principles when seeking to advance their goals, we must regard these attempts even from the most ‘principled’ or strongly convicted politician as ultimately rhetorical.

It is tempting to view the development of state schooling from the perspective of social control, which English historians such as D.G. Paz are inclined to do (Paz, 1980). However, historical reality is generally far too messy for one perspective to satisfy a thorough analysis. Groups who advanced a programme of democracy in England made strange bedfellows and intersected with proponents of education in decidedly unprincipled fashion. Firstly, it must be understood that the concept of mass education predated the concept of state schooling by at least two centuries. Hartlib and Dury in seventeenth century England advanced teachings of Jans Comenius who promoted education for all. While some historians, such as Sadler view this proposed programme of education as democratic, it would be more accurate to say that it was intended to be far-reaching (Sadler, 1966). Dury and Hartlib had little interest in teaching the English poor anything beyond solid moral behaviour and useful agricultural science (Turnbull, 1947).

Proposals for nineteenth century state schooling also had moral conduct and useful knowledge as its aims. It is often thought that the demand for mass education and its realization originated from the people, or more precisely the proletariat. Dewey and Gutmann hold this view. In this telling of educational history, industrial workers fought for universal suffrage and shared the understanding with political actors that such an extension would be irresponsible without a proper education to guide the newly enfranchised (Dewey, 1954; Gutman, 1987). It may very well be true that Chartists wanted both the vote and an education, but those who had been designing proposals for state schooling were more concerned with religious toleration and the diffusion of useful knowledge. Anglican liberals sought to remove sectarian divisions, while utilitarians sought to improve the industry and dignity of the would-be voter. Indeed, parliament fretted more over granting the vote to Catholics than to workers. Expanding rights of citizens beyond propertied Anglicans meant that workers would not only need to be productive, but need to coexist peacefully. Thus, moral education could no longer be the sole domain of the church as Dissenters, Catholics, and Anglicans would all need to get along in the classroom before reaching the factory. This pan-Christian education –– one ‘without raising those great points of theoretical difference by which the country had been so long agitated (Brent, p. 230)’ –– was concerned with tolerance and discipline rather than the informed democratic potential of individual state subjects. Indeed, some of the greatest proponents of universal suffrage such as James Mill and Jeremy Bentham did not regard formal schooling as necessary in informing the attitudes of voters. Rather, it was believed that the very well-informed upper classes –– not the school would educate the working poor in matters political (Clark, p. 180).

The popular school must be viewed as a contingent and historical reality, which is rooted in the state’s desire to maintain civil order. Its origin had more to do with getting kids off the streets and making sure their religious differences didn’t interfere with industry than in developing the ‘complete person.’ It is without a doubt an instrument of *gouvernmentalité* –– one of many technologies available to the state. Thus, the school cannot truly be said to fail in its inability to realize principles of democracy because this was never the school’s intention. Rather the actual school and the realm of theory have largely coexisted in entirely separate spheres. ‘How can the state’s expert administration of the education system be harmonized with the principles of participatory democracy (Hunter, 1993, p. 237)?’ The theorist does not want the school to be coercive and proscriptive, but self-determining.

The problem with theory is that it often has more to do with the performance of ‘mental gymanstics’ that separate the theorist in a strata of moral high ground than in advancing any useful political response to educational issues. Theorists mistrust sociologists and historians because they fear that the methodologies at their disposal are ill-equipped for any theoretical analysis of theory itself. Thus, insular and protectionist theorists seek their own methods of self-analysis. This paper assumes Hunter’s position that theory’s attempt at self-examination contributes more to the ‘inner theatre’ of the theorist than any interpretation of her place in historical and political context.

An overview of the history of theory is beyond the scope of this study, however it will be necessary to trace some trends in its development over the past century. Peter Wagner identifies a split in the 1930s following Edmund Husserl’s declaration of a ‘crisis of the European sciences (Wagner, 2001).’ To Wagner, one response to this crisis was forged by Max Horkheimer whose path led to the development of Critical Theory, whereas Heidegger blazed a divergent path to which post-structuralism continues to refer (Wagner, p. 15-16). Furthermore, ‘Deweyan pragmatism is often seen as a critical inquiry into the modern condition that avoids the pitfalls of the approaches inspired by Horkheimer and by Heidegger (Wagner, p. 16).’ Indeed, Richard Rorty identifies Dewey along with Heidegger and Wittgenstein as the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. However, Rorty’s interpretation of Dewey is well-documented as somewhat opportunistic if not irresponsible (Westbrook, p. 539; Rorty, p.5, 1979). While Rorty sees himself inheriting Dewey’s tradition and Habermas a bit more like Max Weber, J.T. Kloppenberg has convincingly argued that Habermas’ ideal speech situation is more akin to Dewey’s democratic application of the scientific method (Kloppenberg, 1994). An analysis of these three approaches to modern theory will reveal that none escape foundation in moral principles which conflict with the foundation of civil society and the school.

The theoretical methodologies pioneered by Horkheimer, Heidegger, and Dewey can be seen as a response to the problem of experience posed by Kant (Kloppenberg, 1986). The lineage of Heidegger’s thought in the philosophy of the poststructuralists is overtly transcendental, whereas the traditions forged by Horkheimer and Dewey mask their metaphysics, whether intentionally or otherwise, in the discourse of rational consensus. Jacques Derrida, whom many educational theorists invoke in the philosophical stratosphere of utopian potentiality, follows Heidegger in repudiating Kant’s model of critique in which the subject gains insight into the categories of her own experience (Derrida, 1978, p. 278-93). To Heidegger, the incalculable multitude of factors in experience make categorization not only impossible but irrelevant –– what counts is the acknowledgement of their moment of culmination and the limitless potential inherent in each of these moments. So too with Derrida (Derrida, 1978).

The sort of transcendental reduction that Husserl called *epoché* is here a spiritual exercise that interprets categories of experience, and hence knowledge, as potential subjects of discourse. Because everything is uncertain and unanswerable, anything can be true. For Heidegger and Derrida, epistemology is obliterated by the transcendental force of ontology. This does us little good in attempting to transform state schooling. But don’t tell Henry Giroux: He’s convinced that ‘we must do and think the impossible (Giroux, 2003),’ which winds up sounding a lot like ‘we must act out our fantasies’ –– an act the university humanities professor of is often quite willing to perform for fellow initiates in their exclusive societies for the appreciation of transcendental philosophy.

Horkheimer and associated theorists of the Frankfurt school rely on the tradition of German idealism and in particular are steeped in the Marxian application of the dialectic by way of Hegel. Jürgen Habermas, who has distanced himself from Marxism, retains a Hegelian approach in his theory. Habermas upset the community of critical theorists by attacking the poststructuralists whom the American universities continue to hold so dear (Habermas, 1987). Make no mistake that Habermas’ programme is teleological. While it gives the appearance of being detranscendentalized, it employs the quintessentially transcendental *epoché* in which ‘the revelatory moment take[s] place not in the form of a delirious literary epiphany but in the more sober setting of the ideal speech situation (Hunter, 2006, p. 110).’ To Habermas, true justice will appear beyond the irrational adherence to national identities and fickle association. There is no lifeworld. Just as there is no original position in the case of Rawlsian justice. These are in the imagination of the philosopher. History reveals that public law is based on contingent political circumstance –– not any ideal. ‘This transformation took place, however, not as an occlusion of lifeworld norms and intuitions by the formal-positive character of law but as a result of the protracted establishment of a new norm for politics: the maintenance of a territorial state’s external security and internal social peace (Hunter, 2006, p. 111).’ Positive law distances itself from transcendent principles so that it may serve as the arbiter in a death struggle between sects whose competing claims to true transcendent principles are irreconcilable. To argue that the law should be more moral is to open the door to the possibility that only one truth claim may prevail.

Today many confuse neoliberal ideology as a truth claim. To attack neoliberalism from the position of critical theory is either to coexist with the neoliberal ideologue at a distance as some aloof moral stalwart or to insist that the principles of public law should be based on a particular moral basis rather than on the basis of neutrality –– that is, one that protects one moral claim from destruction by another. Habermas argues for the ‘the political reinstatement of transcendent norms, this time in the form of the supposedly detranscendentalized metaphysics of discursive democracy (Hunter, 2006, p. 111).’

To theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as well as Giorgio Agamben, Foucault’s notion of biopower is central. To them, biopower is the singular organizing principle of the sovereign. Yet each misreads historical nature of sovereignty and the limits of its access to available technologies of human organization. Hardt and Negri’s view of biopower is totalizing. For them the sovereign is a motor in the nebulous machine of Empire. Hardt and Negri come from a Deleuzian angle. The authors replace Marx with Deleuze and evoke St. Francis of Assisi in expressing that ‘Once again in post modernity we find ourselves in Francis’ situation, posting against the misery of power the joy of being (2000: 413).’ Like Derrida and Heidegger, Hardt and Negri emphasize the power of ontology as undefinable potentiality. In Hardt and Negri’s view, it is the Empire vs. the Multitude. As Rose and Rabinow note, ‘This version of the concept of “biopower” is emptied of its analytic force –– it can describe everything but analyze nothing (Rabinow & Rose).’ This reading of biopower is not dissimilar to Giorgio Agamben’s.

Agamben continues in the poststructuralist tradition forged by Heidegger and carried out by Derrida. Agamben’s mission is to redefine Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in the age of globalization. Agamben fuses thanatopolitics –– the politics of who should live and who should die –– with Carl Schmitt’s political theology (Agamben, 1998; Agamben, 2005). Following Schmitt, Agamben determines that sovereignty is defined by its ability to declare a state of exception. This exceptional state allows the sovereign to reduce the subject to bare life, or *zoe*, in order to freely end one’s existence. Agamben, like Hardt and Negri, offers a totalizing view of sovereignty. They disregard the historical circumstances in which the modern sovereign state emerged –– that is, religious civil war and the foundation of sovereignty in civil order. This order may seek technologies like biopolitical control towards its end, but biopolitics itself is not its basis. Neither view is far from Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus. Many French thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis who were disullioned with Althusser and the failure of the 1968 revolution have sought Marx-inspired, but non Marxian theoretical solutions to modern problems of praxis.

Castoriadis’ dense meta-philosophy has a lot to say about humanity’s radical capacity to reimagine society, yet offers little in the way of institutional configuration towards these ends (Bernstein, 1989; Castoriadis, 1987). In this regard, Castoriadis echoes Dewey’s claim that democracy is the thing everyone would choose if they were free enough to be able to. Castoriadis is more concerned with asserting that human beings can alter the conditions of their existence than describing how. Castoriadis has developed a unique vocabulary for constructing his philosophy, which mixes ancient Greek political theory with socialism and Freudian psychoanalysis. To engage with Castoriadis’ philosophy is to embark on a project of ‘inner theatre’ not unlike that required of Heideggerian transcendentalism. Castoriadis’ radical imagination is not at all distant from Husserl’s concept of *ephoché*. One refreshing aspect of Castoriadis’ thought is his acceptance of revolution. Unlike Dewey or Giroux who want radical change in small, rational increments, Castoriadis is aware that the application of his philosophy is not in accordance with the modern state. Rather than overlook the sovereign state’s historical existence, Castoriadis freely imagines its abolition (Castoriadis, 1997a). While it may be unnecessarily destructive, it is not dishonest.

What I have hoped to show is that utopian thinking in the realm of educational political praxis is dishonest. Henry Giroux wants dialectical, cultural studies-based emancipation through education –– but, like Amy Gutmann, he doesn’t want students to democratically choose something racist or sexist. Students who would choose such courses must be steered athwart towards more palatable positions –– a process that requires pastoral management. Giroux’s public sphere doesn’t exist. It’s in the same imaginary bin as Habermas’ lifeworld. To strive towards this idea of unity is to proudly navigate through the cosmos with science fiction as your guide.

When theorists forsake context and contingency in favour of principle, they not only affirm their distance from politics as mere critics, but reveal that the object of their critique is misplaced: schools will never live up to the theorist’s principles because schools are not built on such principles –– only hope and rhetoric make it appear so. To suggest that schools ought to be built on such principles is either to ignore political reality, misjudge human nature, or to foment a revolution. It would seem more responsible for the educational theorist to develop a closer relationship to history and political reality so that theory may inch its way out obscurity towards praxis. Otherwise the development of schools will continue to operate in isolation from the theorist for whom the school is an impenetrable concern.

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1. See for example Hunter’s “Religious Freedom in Early Modern Germany: Theology, Philosophy, and Legal Casuistry (2014)” for an elaboration. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.facinghistory.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)