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Legitimacy or Political Mobilisation? A Critical Analysis of Norwegian Social Studies Textbooks

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Abstract

This textbook assessment project examined the most commonly used textbooks in social studies (in which civics is an integrated part in Norway) for lower and upper secondary education. Political participation depends on an understanding of what political participation is, how it makes a difference in the political system and how it makes sense to the individual citizen. How textbooks present political participation as meaningful action is therefore the research question for this paper. Democratic theory provides different conceptions of what political participation is, what role it plays in political life and what motivates individual political participation. The textbook data is therefore be examined in relation to a theoretical framework of democratic theory.

Introduction

In their analysis of political education in American schools, Hellinger and Judd argue that social studies and/or civics systematically aim at legitimising the American political system (Hellinger and Judd 1991). The political system is described in terms of its major governmental institutions (the executive and the representative assemblies). Political participation is restricted to voting. It is repeatedly asserted that this system is very democratic and worth supporting but it is not explained why.

Research on political education practices in schools is scarce, but most works correspond with the overall interpretation of Hellinger and Judd. Empirical research suggests that political education at school in Western countries emphasises the formal structures of political institutions, the constitution, the formal rights of citizens, debating current issues and moralism in various combinations (Patrick and Hoge 1991; Dekker 1994; Audigier 1999b; Mintrop 2002). It is possible that debating current issues in class could be a type of political education that does not legitimise or restrict possible political participation. Classroom discourses on current issues ought to be examined more closely to assess their nature and content. This is, however, not the issue in this paper. Emphasis on formal rights and the formal structure of the executive and the legislature may also be combined with critical perspectives, even if this does not seem very likely. In its moral aspects, the emphasis is on civic deeds. Citizens are obliged to pay taxes, obey the laws and serve in the armed forces (Audigier 1999a; Audigier 1999b). This is clearly in line with the motive of legitimation.

There are reports of attempts to introduce political education which aim at the critical assessment of the political system and which promote political participation beyond voting. We may label this mobilising political education. Such attempts are documented

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in both Germany and in the UK (Tønnesen 1992; Clarke 2007). However, these initiatives seem not to have been implemented to any significant degree.

Eikeland examines political education in Norwegian national curricula and reports similar tendencies of legitimising and restricting political participation (Eikeland 1989). However, he found a radical change in the curricular documents of the 1970s, that pointed to a greater mobilising direction. Eikeland also refers to the works of Thomas Englund, who reports a similar development in Sweden. These were not only ideas and suggestions, but statutory elements in the national curriculum. Later curricula have maintained this conception of political education. The present Norwegian national curriculum outlines a different political education in the final compulsory social studies course at upper secondary school.ⁱ It requires that in addition to a presentation of political institutions and formal rights, political education must teach students how they themselves can make a difference and change society.ⁱⁱ They must learn how to influence politically. The curriculum states that not only voting must be taught, but also party activism, organisations, direct action and informal contacts are avenues to political influence. The curriculum also requires that students must consider and be concerned with the preservation and development of democracy.

To what extent are these ambitions realised at the grass root level in the classrooms? As Norwegian teachers rely heavily on the textbook in their teaching (Christophersen, Lotsberg et al. 2003), the textbook is a reliable indicator of the content of what is taught. In this paper I examine the textbook most currently used in Norwegian secondary education. To what extent and how have teachers been able to escape the legitimising political education?

An interest in textbooks does not imply that they are assumed to determine the political understanding of young citizens. Education is one of many sources of political ideas and concepts to which that young people are exposed (Niemi and Junn 1998). Furthermore, the conditions under which adolescents retain or ignore such ideas are complex, and they interpret and reintegrate political ideas and messages in ways that are not uniform nor easily predictable. In this complex web of political socialisation schools nevertheless play a role.

There are thus many questions about textbooks that need to be addressed:

- To what extent are constitutional detail, the formal structures of main political institutions and formal rights and obligations of citizens retained?
- To what extent are democratic principles and concepts introduced?
- To what extent are there assertions about the political system being legitimate and democratic?
- To what extent are there moral messages about being a good citizen?
- To what extent are critical assessments offered? To what extent are critical assessments based on explicit standards?
- To what extent is political participation expanded beyond the process of voting, how is political participation understood and what motivates such participation?

In this paper these questions will be discussed in relation to the most commonly used textbooks for the compulsory civics course in upper secondary education in Norway.

Conceptions of Democracy

Democratic theory will serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis of textbook political education, because this will provide different ideas on what political participation is and how it makes sense. Furthermore, one of the research questions concerns whether democratic principles are taught. Beyond basic political rights there is no agreement as to what are democratic principles. David Held's typology will be applied, although it will be supplemented by other works (Held 1996).

According to Larry Diamond, Joseph Schumpeter's model of democracy is a minimalist model (Diamond 1999). Political participation is for Schumpeter restricted to voting and political discussions between elections (Held 1996, p.189). In elections voters choose among competing élites who are aligned in political parties competing for votes. Political participation is thus not a matter of influencing political issues, but of deciding who will decide later on. A related version is that voters choose not only élites but also political programmes (Østerud 1991). In this case elections indirectly influence policy contents.

There are few constraints on élites once they (and their programme) are voted into power. The people's representatives in the legislature control the government, which is in supreme command of the governmental apparatus and thus able to act fairly freely. Elections make sense because elected representatives directly determine public policy.

Held argues that most writers in the liberal tradition see human action as a matter of self-serving actions aimed at realising individual interests and preferences (1996).ⁱⁱⁱ Motivation to act politically is therefore instrumental on an individual basis. However, Schumpeter also stresses that citizens are often irrational, uninformed and emotional and this implies that they will also sometimes act from these motives.

Pluralism broadens the concept of political participation (Held 1996). Political processes are driven by a variety of political actors, including governmental institutions, elected élites and a broad range of interest groups. In the Scandinavian perspective, it seems reasonable to include both ad hoc groups and permanent interest organisations in the interest group category. Even if passive support for interest groups is an option, pluralism points to the importance of citizen activism in such interest groups.

Held distinguishes between pluralism and neo-pluralism, the latter recognising political inequalities in society and acknowledging that economic interests often have a stronger say than other interests. But neo-pluralism retains the notion of an open political system in which most people can organise and make a difference. However, to make a difference does not mean simply to have it one's own way. Influence is a matter of partial influence - alongside other actors - in some issues. Political motivation is also instrumental in the pluralist account. However, citizen political influence is dependent on organisation and collective action.

From the 1960s participatory democracy challenged pluralism and introduced a broader concept of political participation and of its motivation (Lafferty 1983). In addition to representative arrangements and interest groups, this theory argues for direct democracy particularly at the local level (Held 1996); first of all within political parties and organised interest groups^{iv}; second, in local government structures; third, at the work place, and finally as self-government in neighbourhoods and voluntary associations.

Instrumental political motivation is important in participatory democracy, and this perspective recognises the importance of organisation for political influence. But writers such as Carole Pateman and Hannah Arendt also emphasise that political participation has a potential for moral, intellectual and social development for all participants (Pateman 1970; Lafferty 1983). This may also motivate political participation.

Deliberative democracy is an ideal of democracy as a free deliberation on values, objectives and strategies that are in the interest of the entire political community (Eriksen 1995; Gutmann 1999). In such deliberations the best arguments must prevail and power is not to be applied. Arguments that only refer to self-interest are not legitimate. Deliberations may characterise most forms of political participation and processes. However, deliberative public debate is seen as an important type of political participation. In public debate proposals and ideas will be tested, i.e. it must be examined whether they are in the best interest of the entire political community.

Political deliberations are expected to influence public policy contents because such deliberations will provide a common normative and conceptual basis for specific policy making. Instrumental political motivation is implied here, but interests of groups and individuals are seen as related to common interests. However, it could also be argued that self-development is an important motivation for participating citizens because becoming part of a broader community is a matter of developing the self.

Empirical Analysis

The four most commonly used textbooks for the compulsory civics course in upper secondary education are examined in this section. The main focus is on the chapters on politics, the main contents of which are textually analysed.

To what extent are constitutional detail, formal structure of main political institutions and formal rights and obligations of citizens retained?

The formal set-up of main institutions and the constitutional principles remain prominent issues in the textbooks. The most striking finding, however, is that the constitution, the formal rights of citizens and the formal structure of national, regional and local government are issues that do not dominate. In one of the books it occupies 20 of 50 pages, in one other it is shorter and in two books it is reduced to a summary over 5-6 pages.

In all the books these issues are examined in a descriptive, summarising fashion. There is not much discussion of them. What is emphasised is the right to vote, the constitutional rules of parliamentarism and the formal structure and main tasks of the national

assembly, the cabinet and the local and regional government councils. In some books it is mentioned very briefly – 6 to 10 lines – that the cabinet ministers also head the ministries and thus the public administration which has an influence in terms of its expertise. Finally, it is also explained briefly how the national assembly is composed of representatives from all regions and how the candidates for elections are selected. However, except for one book, these issues do not dominate.

To what extent is political participation expanded beyond voting and how is political participation understood?

Concerning this issue, the textbooks resemble each other. They all point out that there are several ways to participate politically and they all systematise in the same way. There are elections, interest organisations, direct action and the mass media. This implies that the Norwegian textbooks have all taken a firm step beyond the narrow conception that political participation is restricted to mainly or only voting.

Voting is the type of political participation that is clearly most elaborated on in all the textbooks. All the textbooks insist that when a citizen votes, he/she actually influences policy outcomes. Voting therefore makes sense as a pursuit of interests and preferences. The textbooks all stress that voting is a matter of choosing among parties that offer distinct alternative political programs. The books all present profiles of the 8 or 9 major political parties in Norway. The differences among parties are explained in terms of crucial issues and in terms of ideological basis. This leads to some questionable assertions, for example, that Labour is ideologically socialist, or that all non-socialist parties are eager to reduce the role of the state while the socialist parties have the opposite view. In fact, the public sector has been growing under both socialist and non-socialist governments. One book states that political parties differ more on single issues and that ideological differences are no longer very easy to discern. But all the books stick to the idea that parties offer alternative goals, visions and strategies for the development of society and that voters choose among these. This aspect of political education is close to competitive elite democracy.

But the textbooks also outline political participation beyond the strict limits of competitive elite democracy. All the textbooks stress the role of interest organisations and point out that they engage in lobbying elected politicians and in hearings on policy issues. Some also indicate the various corporatist arrangements that have been very important in Norwegian politics (Olsen 1978). The textbooks do not explain what it is to be politically active in interest organisations, they only point out that one may join, thus suggesting quite passive support for an organisation with which one agrees.

Direct action is also elaborated substantially in all the textbooks. The kinds of activities direct action groups organise are explained in detail, explaining the intention of getting the attention of the mass media and of building up sympathy in public opinion. Sometimes it is also to provide alternative information to decision makers.

The textbooks explain the relationship between interest organisations and action groups on one side and the government on the other, as one in which organisations and action groups state their views and argue, whereas the government listens and is quite attentive.

One book indicates that some organisations are stronger than others but the main message is that a broad range of interest organisations and action groups articulate their views to attentive politicians. There is no doubt, however, that it is the elected politicians who make the decisions. This is repeated throughout all the textbooks. It is never a matter of politicians making decisions together with other actors.

All the books offer thorough treatments of the role of the mass media. However, these analyses mainly discuss how the mass media influences decision making processes, how the mass media provides knowledge about political life to citizens and how elites dominate the mass media. The only aspect that makes the mass media a channel for participation is that citizens may have letters printed in newspapers. In the other mass media this option does not exist. However, in the Norwegian context, with a high density of small, local newspapers, writing letters like this does play a role in local politics. New types of mass media organised political participation such as blogging or protest actions organised on the Internet are hardly mentioned at all.

Some textbooks introduce other constraints on elected politicians in addition to mass media, interest organisations and action groups. Two of them explain how globalisation represent a constraint on public policy-making at a national level. Some of also indicate very carefully that the bureaucracy plays a role, because of its professional expertise. But there are also accounts about the bureaucracy as the loyal, neutral and professional servant of the elected representatives. The elected politician stands out as a very powerful person in the political universe of the textbooks. He/she is, however benevolently, listening to the views of others before he makes his decision.

What motivates political participation?

It is striking that in all four books a major point is to encourage the reader to vote. To some extent other forms of participation are also encouraged. In some places this wish to stimulate participation results in moralism (see below). But there are also sections that attempt to explain in a more sober way what makes political participation worth the effort.

The main argument is that by being politically active a person may change public policy. This includes voting, direct contact with officials, writing letters to local newspapers, joining interest groups and action groups. Textbooks offer examples of issues that may mobilise young people, such as cuts in local government welfare services or the closing of a school. They tell a story of successful political mobilisation that led to the desired outcome. Not unsurprisingly, the examples are all from local government politics.

The textbooks are quite insistent in arguing that an individual may make a difference. One book briefly notes that, by being a member in an organisation or action group, one may also demonstrate and develop identities but in general, such notions of political participation as a collective phenomenon are absent. Political participation is thus motivated mainly as individual pursuit of preferences and interests.

To what extent are democratic principles and concepts introduced?

All the four books outline democracy quite extensively. The definitions on democracy do not vary much. Human rights are emphasised as a key element. Beyond that, democracy is defined as a mixture of representative elite democracy and pluralism. Some books also mention direct democracy, but dismiss it for practical reasons, and argue that such democracy occurs only on rare occasions when there is a referendum - which is a very narrow conception of direct democracy. In line with pluralist theory, the textbooks point out that various interest organisations and action groups are involved in political processes. They also indicate that administrative agencies may play such a role but this is done very briefly, in 10 or so text lines. The role of the mass media is also emphasised and there are hints about individual citizens direct contact with elected representatives. This quite openly pluralist account is modified by a consistent insistence that elected politicians make the decisions and are in charge. They are influenced and listen to other political actors, but they remain the sole decision makers. The pluralist account does not accord elected politicians such a strong role but rather emphasises that they are one group of actors alongside many others. This insistence on the dominance of elected politicians is more in line with competitive elite democracy theory.

To what extent are there assertions about the political system being legitimate?

The textbooks all stress the nature of democracy and the democratic nature of the Norwegian political system. As argued above, the textbooks describe the actual political system and its arrangements for political participation on exactly the same lines: competitive elite democracy modified by pluralism. The textbooks also explicitly assert that Norway is a democracy.

They all make a distinction between democracy – in pluralist-elite representative terms – and non-democratic regimes. One book states that totalitarianism is the alternative to democracy, the other textbooks argue that dictatorship is the alternative. These comparisons between democracy and the alternatives leave no doubt as to what is to be preferred.

At this point the textbooks are clearly in line with Hellinger and Judd (1991). Two of the textbooks are also in line with the international findings in that there is little critical analysis of the political system. However, the texts are not completely closed to critical assessments. They also invite the students to make critical assessments, through questions provided at the end of each chapter. More interestingly, two of the textbooks offer critical analyses within the text. One of them does so in quite brief sections of between 6 and 10 lines on issues such as the power of administrative leaders, whether interest groups are too strong, or the mass media's vulgarisation of political debate into entertainment. Another book offers a lengthy analysis on how democratic various political systems really are. It is argued that democracy is a set of ideals and that various states differ on how well they implement and respect these ideals. Western states may deviate whereas non-democratic regimes may respect some democratic principles after all. But this book also portrays Norway as a country which is organised on democratic principles.

The two books that are most elaborate on formal structure are also those that insist that Norway is a democracy without any reservations and they are the ones which do not offer critical accounts about the political system.

To what extent is there moralisation about being a good citizen?

Such moralisation is not very dominant in the chapters on politics. In some books it is underlined that elected politicians organise activities and services that we all need. In order to maintain this, we all have to contribute by means of paying taxes and accepting other burdens. There is thus a tendency to stress that we have to understand the importance of the job our politicians is doing.

More outspoken is the moralisation about voting. One book explains that the term *idiot* originally meant someone who was not interested in politics. This term is included in current Norwegian, meaning a fool. The other books rhetorically ask how the student would feel if he/she lived in a non-democratic regime. They remind the readers that democratic rights were once fought for very hardly, and rhetorically ask whether we take these for granted. The textbooks mention political alienation, that people do not trust elected political leaders and that an individual may feel that one vote does not matter. The textbooks tend to dismiss this as threats against democracy, in chapters titled 'Threats against Democracy'. Only one textbook refers to this in a more neutral manner without judging it.

The moral obligation to vote is accompanied with explanations that voting and other forms of political participation are worthwhile because by means of such political participation each citizen may make a difference on specific issues.

Discussion

The four Norwegian textbooks are quite new, being published for the new national curriculum of 2006. The rewriting of the textbooks in some points matches international findings on the contents of political education; on other points they show interesting divergences.

The textbooks are broadly similar in many ways, but differ in one important respect: two offer elaborated and critical discussions of major aspects of the political system. These two books also differ in not making the formal structure of parliament, cabinet, constitution and local councils a major issue. This represents a marked deviation from the tradition of legitimising the political order. It is furthermore worth noticing that these critical analyses, especially in one book, are based on conceptions of democracy as set of criteria and an assessment of whether various aspects of political structures and processes are in accordance with these criteria. This is important because in the classroom discourse critical discussions are easily reduced to liking or disliking. But qualified critical debate should be founded on principles (Leleux 1997). One may of course imagine criteria other than democracy, such as environmental and ecological values, gender equality, equality or justice. The other two textbooks only open critical assessments in the questions offered at the end of each chapter, and not in the text.

However, even in the textbooks that offer critical analysis of the political system legitimacy remains a major message as well. In all of them there is an elaboration of democracy being a mixture of pluralism and competitive elite democracy. Next, it is asserted that Norway is a democracy. The presentation of various forms of political participation and the emphasis on elected politicians as the major decision makers is in line with this very same conception of democracy. The political system is thus declared to be legitimate not mainly by reference to constitution, parliamentarism and the high quality of parliament, cabinet, king and local councils but by reference to a broader notion of democracy based in pluralism and competitive elite democracy.

The democratic turn, that Eikeland noted in Norwegian curricula from the 1970s, thus seems to have resulted in a new form of legitimising political education. Whereas legitimacy was once grounded in king and church, in national identities, in identification with major political institutions or in belief in rational government, the democratic turn from the 70s leads to a new form of legitimising political education. The political system is legitimate by its adherence to a mixture of pluralism and competitive elite democracy.

It should not surprise us that legitimacy has been and, in my findings, still is a major issue in political education. Green argues that political elites in most western states introduced compulsory schooling as political rights were given to larger segments of the population and that one conscious aim was to secure the legitimacy of the political order (Green 1997). As has been argued by Audigier (1999) and Clark (2007) the reintroduction of various types of civics in France and Britain in recent years has been sparked by increasing alienation, social tension and violent opposition, leading the government to introduce civics to stabilise. From a different perspective, Benavot et al argue in all societal sectors there is a tendency to copy solutions and institutional forms developed elsewhere (Benavot, Cha et al. 1991). Specific institutions become self evident and spread across large fields as the only way to do things. Educational systems for instance are surprisingly similar across nations that are very different. The idea that public schooling should legitimise the political order would in Benavot's account be such a self evident institution.

Even if the textbooks do not recognise that criticisms of participatory arrangements are justified (one textbook is partially an exception here) they indirectly recognise the challenge that many adolescents are negative to traditional forms of political participation and feel that voting is of no use. This recognition is seen in the very explicit treatment of why citizens should participate. The problem with these motivating efforts is that they try to make political participation meaningful on an individual basis. But the individual citizen *is* powerless and makes no difference. Political power is a collective phenomenon (Melucci 1996). It is a major weakness that the textbooks only focus on the individual.

The individualistic understanding of political motivation, the understanding of democracy as a competitive elite democracy modified by pluralism and the message that Norwegian political life operates in accordance with these democratic ideals are all problematic aspects of political education.

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Notes

ⁱ All young Norwegians repeatedly study political education and related issues in a social studies subject that is on the timetable every year throughout the 10-year compulsory schooling. This political education effort is finalised the second year at upper secondary school in a social studies course which has two lessons a week. Most young Norwegians attend it and this analysis of Norwegian political education focuses on that course.

ⁱⁱ The curriculum was found on <http://skolenettet.nls.no/dok/lp/samfl.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ There are important exceptions, John Stuart Mill for instance also underlined the developmental potential of political participation.

^{iv} Pluralism implies citizen activism in interest groups, participatory democracy expands this notion.