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Civic education as transformation? Studying teachers within international networks

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The transformation of society: the need for legal/political/institutional change and social/psychological change

The United States Supreme Court's famous 1954 decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, followed by the successes of the Civil Rights movement, brought about a political and legal/institutional transformation that seemed finally to achieve the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation and Civil War a century earlier. Yet, as I came to understand after a former student terrorised several states in a racist shooting spree, the United States never attempted a systematic nation-wide effort to eliminate racism through schools. The shooting was not an isolated incident, and the United States is still rife with racism and racial problems. Even the promise of *Brown* and the Civil Rights movement continues to languish, as the third most powerful elected official in the country publicly celebrates segregation without being compelled to resign while reports of racial purging of the voter roles before the 2000 election emerge from Florida.¹

Could a national school-based campaign against racism have made a difference? The attitudes and dispositions we would hope to foster in students in order to overcome racism are also the foundation of a healthy and sustainable democratic government. This student had taught me that this institutional and legal/political transformation could only be fulfilled by a parallel change in the attitudes of individuals, a social and psychological transformation. Even the most enlightened social policy would fail without such a change. I began to struggle with the question of what kind of education would be necessary to overcome such antisocial attitudes.

In *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897) John Dewey wrote 'I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. All reforms which rest simply upon the law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile.' This view - that shaping individuals can bring about almost any societal change - did not live up to his expectations because it neglects the structures within which we must live. Good people within structures of government or business must sometimes make decisions they know to be against the good of humanity. As Charles Taylor explains it, if our problems were merely 'a matter of a perhaps unconscious orientation...it would be hard enough to combat, but at least it might yield to persuasion. But powerful mechanisms of social life press us...[and change] will have to be institutional as well' (Taylor, 1991). I believe that this point - that social/psychological change and institutional change are interdependent - is critical for educators to understand, particularly for civic educators, and is an idea that must be conveyed through civic education.

For post-communist countries, many of which will have moved from the Soviet Bloc to the European Union in only a dozen years, the stunning legal/institutional and political

¹ See, for example, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, 2003, by Greg Palast, or articles and newsclips from BBC news at www.gregpalast.com.

changes need to be fulfilled by a complementary transformation of attitudes and dispositions. Unlike in the United States, there is in these countries a deliberate attempt to bring about the appropriate development and transformation of democratic attitudes and dispositions through civic education. As an attempt to match social and psychological change to the relatively consolidated institutional transformation, its successes and failures are thus of global significance. Unfortunately, as Tom Vontz's evaluation of the excellent Project Citizen reveals, the development of such dispositions by even the best programmes is no easy task (Vontz, Metcalf and Patrick, 2000).

The intent of this paper is not to evaluate the success of the transformation - an important task, to be sure - but to discuss the forces and structures shaping the opportunities for change. It will lay out a scheme for examining civic education as an international system. It argues that the transformation of teachers is particularly important, and it discusses some of the additional influences or constraints on civics teachers.

A schema for thinking about the global nature of civic education programmes

For heuristic purposes, permeable levels can be identified in the development of civic education reform. These are international civics networks, funding agencies, and governmental organisations (CiCe, Civitas, USAID, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Union etc.) There is a real division between the United States and Europe: one European official characterised the difference and the struggle for influence as a war. Speaking generally about the influence on education, the official derided the privatised education springing up that has such high tuition that some young women turned to prostitution to help pay for their education. Another, referring specifically to civics, stated that there were general philosophical differences between Europe and the US, and while a variety of views is healthy for a democracy, in fact it seemed to produce paralysis. Groups in some countries seemed unable to choose between approaches, and when conferences were organised with both Americans and Europeans present to facilitate an informed decision, it became evident that they didn't want to make a decision that would jeopardise funding from either source. Some American officials with whom I have spoken concur that there are deep philosophical differences, and there seems to be little interest in cooperation or coordination between groups that would seem to be competing for influence in transition societies.

One of the ideological differences between the US and Europe concerns governmental or non-governmental groups. The idea of civil society, which is very popular for a variety of reasons in the United States, motivates many networks to cooperate with so-called non-governmental organisations. The EU and the Council of Europe, however, often work through official channels, government ministries, etc., and ask them to supply an appropriate person for a desired position or representative. In this way, American and European networks can create a schism that penetrates into national contexts, where they essentially compete for influence through different channels. In addition, the Council of Europe is sometimes felt by those in the Baltic states to devote its more limited energies and resources to crisis areas, e.g. south-eastern Europe, rather than to relatively stable-seeming countries; USAID retired Estonia (and similar states) by 1995 and concentrated its efforts in Africa and elsewhere.

In practice, the American interest in civil society seems to create the appearance of civil society. A truly independent civil society requires funding, and transition countries,

particularly small ones, do not yet seem to have the surplus income to support many such organisations independently. As a result, many NGOs in fact get a lot of funding from the government, which makes their status a little less clear. The problem seems to be more in foreign definitions and expectations than in the reality. While some NGOs are full-fledged and flourishing institutions, some seem to be ad-hoc, with apt titles, but little more than a mailbox most of the time. Perhaps Americans wink at this practice, whereby people can basically declare themselves an NGO, have a title, business cards, a mailbox and maybe a brochure but little more, or perhaps it suffices; this is not at all to say that such arrangements are unsuccessful, merely that the concepts and the expectations they carry can be misleading.

One problem ‘fully-functioning’ NGOs face is the need for a constant stream of money, and since outside funding sources often have their own agendas and ideas, the local NGOs seem compelled to jump from one project to the next. The projects may all be worthy, but without sustained funding, textbooks may be created but courses never developed and implemented to use them; there is neither the time nor money available to lobby governments to adopt new programs. In addition, NGOs must constantly be looking for the next activity and source of income, further cutting into their time. In sum, they are less able to develop and to implement a coherent strategy due to the ad-hoc nature and the piecemeal and multiple-source character of their funding.

Finally, amidst some scarcity and insecurity, self-preservation and personal interests can collide with principles or ideal solutions, while money and opportunities can be distributed more to build personal networks than to select the participants most obviously connected to the work, or even functional in the official languages in use. One individual expressed to me a disinclination to participate in a certain reform because a positive change could undermine the ability to justify international assistance, thereby threatening this person’s well-being. There is no mechanism to guarantee that actors sacrifice self-interest to principle, and the stability and long tenure of relationships and contacts may conflict with the goals of a broader distribution of training, experience and ideas.

Power comes with money, and though some make every attempt to be sure they enter into contracts as equals, often the funding institutions provide the ‘experts’, whether this is in fact valid or not. And there may still be some imbalance between transition countries and EU countries and the US, a problem sometimes exacerbated by language barriers. Access to English was more constrained than in Western Europe, and creative thinking (like early posting of papers) can help where funding is absent. While money can create some unequal or ‘semi-equal’ partnerships, some groups like the Soros Foundation devote money for ‘east-to-east’ meetings to share developments and experiences.

Between these international and national actors, particularly teacher-trainers, textbook authors, curriculum-developers and researchers, stands a language barrier. This language barrier is permeable in one direction: ideas easily work their way into these countries, because many national actors are multilingual. Few outsiders can fully appreciate what is going on inside, though, because few people involved with civic education master languages like Czech, Hungarian or Estonian. This creates a certain autonomy for actors working with international money.

From national actors, ideas are passed along to teachers (who sometimes work on textbooks too, or in teacher training) through textbooks, teacher-training sessions, exam-preparation materials from the government, etc. These forces shape teachers who pass

along ideas in the classroom to the students. This is a general outline of the civic-education-related structures within which teachers work, develop, and participate.

Civic education in transition countries: the role of experiences, others, the media and textbooks in changing mentalities

How well has civic education succeeded in its task of changing mentalities? I think we all believe in the potential of civic education but have concerns about its efficacy, particularly in the hands of people, some of whom had their opportunities for professional growth severely constrained, some of whom are uninterested in change, and some of whom have serious reservations about the changes they see. (Others have, of course, completely reinvented themselves with the help of these networks' support.) A focus on civic education provides only a partial view into the changing of mentalities during transition. It is partial for three reasons: first, civic education is only one of many factors that shape civic views; second, because its audience is children, not people who grew up in the Soviet Bloc. Finally, in Estonia at least, students have only one hour a week of civic education in the fourth, eighth and ninth grades, and two hours a week in the twelfth grade.

Regarding the factors that shape our views, I suggest in my teaching that everything we know comes from four main sources: textbooks, the media, our experiences, and from other people (and what we learn from others must ultimately derive from one of the first three sources.) Among the people from whom students learn, are civics teachers more influential than friends and family members? Do textbooks hold their own against the media? What weight do civics courses hold when compared to life experiences? Perhaps civic education does not play much of a role. Indeed, those of us who grew up in market economies and democracies may have learned mostly from experience, the media and our families. We know, for example, that a family's level of education and the number of books in the home are highly correlated with civic knowledge (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz, 2001). To note one example, when teachers in Estonia began to speak about the law and legal issues, they found that many (if not most) children thought that the court system used juries, which are not used in Estonia. They are prominent, however, in Hollywood movies.

Particularly important for civic education teachers would seem to be political participation itself, particularly in school reform. Reform of the education system is a critical element for the long-term success of the democratisation and preparation for a free market projects. As McGinn and Epstein emphasise, in transitional states we should understand democratisation not just in terms of the existence of majority rule or guaranteed rights, but in terms of participation both in decision-making and in the formulation of choices (McGinn and Epstein, 1999). What role does education play in increasing participation and democratisation? The relationship between democratisation and education is quite complex. Unlike long-established democracies where children are by far the primary focus of educational transformation for democratic citizenship, this transformation is needed throughout the population in post-communist countries. Increased participation in education, therefore, 'offers adult citizens a unique opportunity to participate in the governance of their society' and in 'the generation of a majority consensus about issues' (McGinn and Epstein, 1999). Such participation in decision-making is particularly important for teachers, who have the task of introducing children to the ideals of democracy and participation. Their direct experience of democratic

governance, or lack of it, has the potential to play a critical role in the civic education of their students. An important policy question, then, with implications for civic education, concerns the extent to which teachers are provided with opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making in the work-place or are afforded the leisure to participate substantially in voluntary organisations outside school.

In the aftermath of the Soviet's authoritarian and hierarchical policies that had severe penalties for deviance, the current push for decentralisation creates new spaces for individual action throughout the policy process (Buroway and Verdery, 1999), thus meriting close examination to policy-as-practice (Sutton and Levinson, 2001). Civil society institutions can play a significant role in policy through numerous means, including influencing policy-makers and training implementers; when policy-makers see aspects of policy being handled to their satisfaction by other groups, it frees them to limit their own areas of concern and to withdraw precious resources from those functions. This dynamic means that the range of policy and the actors involved are ever-shifting. Indeed, the well-studied macro-level changes, such as democratisation, are increasingly constituted by micro-level processes, such as shifts in authority centres and variable policy implementation; these micro-level processes have been relatively neglected by scholars (Buroway and Verdery, 1999), but additional study of these processes is needed for an examination of the role of education in democratisation.

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