

Motivating Citizens to Choose Otherwise

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Recently, as I was getting a haircut, it struck me that the way I ask my students to give Jean-Jacques Rousseau a chance is analogous to the way hairdressers always talk to me about hair-care products. It's good for you, we say, and if you try it, you'll like it. Trust me. I know you don't think you want to read *Emile*/buy a diffuser, but really, if you try it you'll like it, and besides, it's good for you. So the question, for anyone who shares Kathy Hytten's democratic sensibilities and mine, is this: given that people who take hair-care products seriously use the same line of reasoning as those of us who take educational philosophy seriously, why should anyone undecided take up Rousseau instead of leave-in conditioner? Put slightly differently, with transnational corporations offering purchasable satisfaction in the form of affordable consumer goods, why should the people of the world turn to critical democracy and compassionate globalization instead?

I think there are excellent reasons to choose compassionate globalization, a notion Hytten elaborates well. In getting to these reasons, I would like to discuss a matter she leaves unaddressed, concerning the actors who are at the heart of her argument. My one worry about Hytten's well-reasoned essay is this: in making the case to educational philosophers that we should think more about subjects in which we have shown deep interest for 2,500 years (citizenship and cosmopolitan sensibilities), I fear she is preaching to the choir. We educational theorists are usually happy to think more, and to tell our students what is good for them, but if Hytten is right about the potential effects of globalization on the world's people, we are not the crucial actors who need to rethink our choices. We need to convince others to do so. Yet if we are to convince the world's people to take up compassionate globalization instead of cheap consumer goods — and I wholeheartedly agree with Hytten that compassionate globalization is the better choice — we need to consider carefully to whom we are recommending this stance and how they might respond.

Following Nicholas Burbules and Carlos Torres, Hytten notes that there are multiple definitions of globalization. She advocates a “globalization from below,” the globalization of cyberactivists, environmentalists, labor unions, and indigenous rights groups, over the “globalization from above” promulgated by free-market capitalists. Actors, however, do not fall so neatly into “above” and “below.” Adequately paid college professors, for instance, cannot reasonably consider ourselves anything but an elite. We are a different elite than executives at Citibank, but compared to Chinese factory workers, we are certainly “above.” My hairdressers are “below” me in pay and status, but they share interests with Proctor and Gamble executives that they do not share with me, and some of these interests might be shared with Chinese factory workers as well. What about Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whose powerful words are aptly cited — as a beleaguered Haitian, who was president and whose words have more force than mine, is he “above” me, a well-

protected U.S. citizen, or “below”? One effect of globalization is surely that status and power are harder to measure on uniform rulers. There are people in the world with more money than me but fewer rights, more of some kinds of power and freedom but less of others. The terms “above” and “below,” therefore, are more misleading than useful. They give a romantic luster to arguments for critical democracy — to disagree is to disempower the masses! — but the masses do not cohere on this matter. Ordinary Russians, after all, elected Vladimir Putin, who has been a better friend to corporations than to critical democracy.

If many people are now satisfied with “vulgar democracy” and “the conflation of human freedom with the free market,” of course, that is all the more reason for education in compassionate globalization. Let us also not forget, though, that schools are top-down, not bottom-up, organizations, and to a certain extent, they should be. Pace Rousseau, children do not always know what is best for them; nor do parents and ordinary citizens always know how children should be educated. The special charge of educators is to consider carefully what is genuinely worth taking seriously, and to act as advocates for that.¹ Yet in doing so, for reasons of ethics and rhetoric it behooves us to listen carefully to students and fellow citizens who do not always agree with us.

Hytten’s essay seems to be addressed to U.S. educators, and to speak about education in the United States. In her final section, when she makes an appeal for an alternative to “the logic and mandates of No Child Left Behind,” she is clearly thinking of U.S. schoolchildren and the U.S. citizens who are seduced by its logic. The public discourse whose attention she wants to shift is the United States’. It is a worthy appeal, but at other points she seems to be speaking to global citizens — as well she should. It is the people of Brazil, Nigeria, Russia, and other faraway places who are suffering the most from globalization and who have the most to gain from environmentalism, indigenous rights movements, and other social justice-driven politics.

Yet too often the world’s citizens, U.S. and others, seem to be making the wrong choices. Many Eastern Europeans, freed to be truly democratic citizens, are turning to conservative politicians who promise economic security in exchange for political power. Brazilians and Indonesians are burning their own forests. I can imagine a theorist of cultural imperialism stepping in here and asking who we are to tell them what they should be doing. If you mention the foolish mistakes U.S. citizens have made in recent years, the question is even sharper. I do not think such theorists have the last word, but I do think we (as educational philosophers and as compassionately-minded global democrats) ought to listen carefully to what the Russians have to say about why they elected Putin, and what the Brazilians have to say about why they are burning the Amazon. We ought also to pay attention to why fellow citizens we consider foolish are making the choices we wring our hands over. If we do not, we have little hope of convincing them to do otherwise. So yes, let us overcome the crisis of imagination, and let us teach our students about globalization, but as we do so, let us remind each other and our students to seek out unfamiliar, dissonant perspectives, in the hope of finding better answers.

It is tempting to say that ordinary Brazilians are burning the Amazon because they are the dupes of manipulative powers ranging from the World Trade Organization to mass media. If this were so, we would have no reason to take their reasons seriously. But I doubt it is. Arguing against “cultural imperialism,” Kwame Anthony Appiah cites evidence gathered by media researchers who interviewed television watchers around the world. They talked, for instance, to students from KwaZulu-Natal, including one young man, Siphon, who had drawn lessons from watching the U.S. soap opera *Days of Our Lives* — “especially relationship-wise.” Siphon learned that a woman ought to be able to tell a man she loves him, and he learned that fathers and sons ought to be friends. “One doubts,” Appiah wryly notes, “that that was the intended message of multinational capitalism’s ruling sector.” Viewers also resist messages they disapprove of. U.S. media may portray retirement homes as friendly places, but Siphon says he would never put his parents in one. As Appiah concludes,

Talk of cultural imperialism structuring the consciousnesses of those in the periphery treats Siphon and people like him as *tabulae rasae* on which global capitalism’s moving finger writes its messages, leaving behind another homogenized consumer as it moves on. It is deeply condescending. And it isn’t true.²

Appiah’s message in *Cosmopolitanism* is that culture makes us different, but also that there are commonalities that make us comprehensible to one another if we take the time to “walk in one another’s moccasins.” I do not really understand why ordinary Russians voted for Putin, but I would hazard a guess that they were doing what all of us do, trying to find a way to live meaningful, fulfilling lives in a world of political and economic uncertainty. (Presumably this is also why so many of my fellow Americans voted for George W. Bush in 2004, a reminder that *prima facie* incomprehensible motivations are not necessarily far from home.) While searching for their local motivations, it is worth remembering these commonalities. As for the young U.S. women who take hair care more seriously than Rousseau, I suspect their interests are not so far from mine. They are interested in self-esteem, social status, and true love. So is Rousseau. And so am I. It just so happens that reading Rousseau, and practicing critical democracy and compassionate globalization, are more likely than hair gel to address the questions that drive away alienation and meaninglessness, and that is why they are worth choosing.

1. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 110–1.