

# Democratic Education in Undemocratic Times

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Seemingly daily, over the past few years, a steady stream of news articles has detailed the political (and politicized) challenges facing U.S. public schools and universities. School board meetings have erupted in conflict, DEI initiatives have been challenged—and defunded—on college campuses, parent groups have challenged state standards and school curricula; still other parent groups have challenged efforts to ban books in public school libraries and classrooms. A recent nationwide survey found that nearly 7 in 10 principals said that conflicts had erupted in their school communities over hot-button political issues.<sup>1</sup> In particular, justice-oriented education efforts—especially focused on race and the persistence of racism in society, as well as on gender and sexual diversity—have increasingly come under attack in primary, secondary, and higher education settings.

Such challenges, of course, are not necessarily new. Public education is an inescapably political arena, characterized by deep and persistent conflicts over resources, recognition, and power. At the same time, philosophers of education have long pointed to the explicitly *normative* valence of these debates. Such debates raise questions about the moral and political aims of education, including questions about what should be taught, how, to whom, for what ends, and on what authority. While diverse in shape and character, the essays in this issue of *Philosophy of Education* take up such debates.

These questions are posed, powerfully, in the lead essay in this issue: Michele Moses’s presidential essay, “Democracy, Extremism, and the Crisis of Truth in Education.” She asks: how can universities foster democracy within an extremist, “post-truth” political climate? Moses’s analysis focuses on the corrosive effects of post-truth extremism, across political positions, and argues for recentering the importance of inquiry and, crucially, the pursuit of *truth* in institutions of higher education. This call for truth is shaped by a pragmatic view of knowledge, one that emphasizes the emergent, fallibilist and cooperative elements of democratic inquiry. Such a view of knowledge, Moses argues, might

be less certain, but more capable of helping university leaders navigate “the complex intermingling of extremist views that are undermining the university’s mission and degrading truth and democracy.”

In his response essay, Winston Thompson raises questions about the epistemic practices and criteria necessary to engage in democratic conversations across difference. He notes, for instance, that there is likely reasonable disagreement about what constitutes *reasonableness* and draws attention to key assumptions, and racialized norms, that are often “smuggled into seemingly neutral conceptualizations of reasonableness.” Thompson notes the potential of focusing on accounts of inquiry that go beyond truth, aiming instead for “epistemic improvement,” and building appreciation for the value of inquiry, even under conditions of ambiguity and division. Yet, he also draws attention to the challenges posed by different interlocutors: those who remain unmoved by new information, as well as more explicitly “bad actors,” who are not only unmoved, but actively seek to undermine the very conditions of inquiry.

Drawing on her experience teaching social studies in Israel, another politically divided democracy, Liat Ariel argues that “post truth” conditions have undermined the ability of teachers to foster deliberative democratic conversation in classrooms. Deliberative theory, and practice, she argues, must change and evolve to confront the new realities facing teachers and students. The response essay, by Jarrod Hanson—also a social studies educator and teacher educator—points to some potential resources for such changes. He highlights strategies for building reciprocity and trust, the importance of asking students to reflect on their beliefs and why they hold them to be true, as well as the importance of critical media literacy and a renewed emphasis on civic education.

Another group of essays asks how debates about democracy, freedom and truth are playing out in institutions of higher education. Liz Jackson, for instance, focuses on the “gray areas” of academic freedom. Academic freedom is not a condition that exists (or not), but a complex continuum that involves more than freedom of expression. Likewise, challenges to academic freedom should consider a broader range of experiences, relations, and capabilities. In her response, Rebecca Taylor draws our attention to the importance of the

“epistemic environments” that cultivate and protect academic freedom. Such environments, Taylor argues, depend on assumptions about the expertise of faculty and their abilities to produce knowledge. However, many colleges and universities are structured by legacies of epistemic injustice, including conditions that have worked against diversifying faculty.

Barbara Applebaum’s essay tackles a criticism posed against anti-racist teaching: that such efforts amount to indoctrination, because participants and “unable” to dissent or disagree with the idea of white supremacy. In contrast, Applebaum argues that, in the context of white complicity, this charge is “more about protecting innocence and avoiding discomfort than about coercion.” She instead frames white complicity as a call for vigilance: a stance that seeks to confront and disrupt systemic injustice. In her response, Shipi Sinha magnifies this analysis, asking about the pedagogical responsibilities and challenges involved in teaching such vigilance. Guoping Zhao also poses questions about efforts to build diversity, equity and inclusion on college campuses. She argues that such efforts often focus on problematically fixed ideas of identity, which may work undermine other important goals of liberal democracy, including free expression, public deliberation and equality of opportunity. In her response, Kal Alston points to the deeply exclusionary foundations of liberal democracy. Drawing on Charles Mills, she notes that racial and gender inferiority are neither anomalies nor aberrations, but built into the very foundations of the liberal democratic state.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Alston agrees that universities—and current DEI efforts—are failing to respond to the real demands of subaltern groups.

In a related essay, Mordechai Gordon and JT Torres reflect on efforts to restrain discourse and language around inclusion. They extend Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the “banality of evil” to another context, arguing that seemingly good deeds may be banal: that is, outwardly admirable, but devoid of any significant moral or political commitments. Here, statements of inclusion may be well-intentioned, but result in shallow and performative practices that are incapable of tackling structural injustices. In her response, Addyson Frattura extends their analysis, raising questions about the very concept and goals of inclusion. Inclusion often frames a purported ‘center’ into which those

‘outside’ might be incorporated and ‘included.’ Yet, true justice demands that we change, even dismantle, these very structures and boundaries that frame some—dominant—groups as ‘inside’ and others on the margins.

Another series of essays explores various aims for higher education. Naoko Saito analyzes the “tyranny of merit” in higher education, instead posing a vision of perfectionist liberal education. Rather than seeking meritorious students—and advancing related ideas of ability, difference, and scarcity—universities might embrace Emersonian ideals of perfectionism, partiality and capacity. In his response, Derek Gottlieb underscores the democratic qualities of such an education, one that must be “undergone, together,” in a spirit of friendship and mutuality that goes beyond the tolerance of difference. Charles Bingham and Malerie Barnes also focus on debates about merit, drawing on attention to how such concepts structure the practice of higher education. Bingham contrasts the material significance of merit with theoretical critiques that pose merit as mere myth. Barnes draws our attention to the material systems and consequences of these ideas. As she argues: “Neither meritocracy or merit are myth; they are real, and they *do* distribute social goods to very specific people.” Such distributions, moreover, reflect racialized histories of dignity and deservingness.

Alysha Banerji draws our attention to other aims of higher education, posing an ideal of “civic imagination,” constrained and shaped by a framework of cosmopolitan education. A cosmopolitan civic education, she argues, can work to check the potential blind spots of national histories, as well as ideas of patriotism that can distort colonial histories of power and exclusion. In his response, Walter Feinberg distinguishes between the “thick” version of global citizenship posed by Banerji, and the “thinner” versions that we might reasonably expect to achieve. Such versions, including one that emphasize creating “communities of shared fates” may allow us to address joint problems, while also not interfering with our important membership in national and cultural communities.

The final essays in this issue focus on the complexity of two different “transformational” strategies for promoting the democratic aims of higher education. Dale Brown foregrounds the transformational role played by hu-

manities curriculum in liberal education, as a means of encountering—and finding oneself—in a broader world. In her response, Debby Kerdeman focuses on the complexity and contingency of such transformational moments. Encountering—or, in her reading, partnering with—humanities texts can indeed be transformative, but such encounters also ask us to be vulnerable, accepting finitude and negation, as well as agency and expansion. Tafadzwe Tivaringe and Roudy Hildreth turn our attention to another strategy: engaging students in critical service-learning projects that attempt to bridge social hierarchies. Drawing on Bourdieu, they critique some of the Freirean foundations of these projects, pointing to the complexity of difference, and the need to attend to everyday moments that might disrupt such hierarchies and better build solidarity and transformation. In her response, Kathleen Sellars notes that Freire may offer more complex understandings of difference, but echoes the opportunities offered by critical service learning in helping college students confront civic challenges across lines of difference.

Taken as a collection, the essays in this issue point to the lively and unsettled questions about the aims and practices of higher education. They also point to the value of philosophical scholarship in showing the conceptual complexity of such questions and raising enduring normative questions about truth, democracy and education.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 John Rogers and Joseph Kahne with Michael Ishimoto, Alexander Kwako, Samuel C. Stern, Cicely Bingener, Leah Raphael, Samia Alkam, and Yvette Conde, “Educating for a diverse democracy: The chilling role of political conflict in blue, purple, and red communities.” UCLA Institute for Education, Democracy and Access (IDEA), November 2022, <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy/>
- 2 Charles Mills, “Black Radical Kantianism,” in *Res Philosophica*, Vol. 95, No. 1, January 2018, p 27; cited in Kal Alston, “Notes on Current Anxieties,” this issue.