

The Power of the People in the Unequal Metropolis

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Ellis Reid argues that recent urban school reformations “take for granted the fractured, racially and economically segregated metropolitan regions that are both the source of and partly constitutive of deep educational injustice,” and are therefore objectionable. It is objectionable because these school reforms “fail to communicate our regard for one another as equal members of our political community.”¹ To support his argument, Reid draws from Seana Shiffrin’s democratic law, focusing on its communicative nature and how these laws, like educational reforms, should allow us, and not bar us, from communicating our mutual regard to one another. Accordingly, throughout his work, Reid provides a clear account of Shiffrin’s philosophy to point to the ways that recent education reforms do not allow people to communicate their mutual regard to one another.

In my response, I’d like to further explore the ideas presented in Shiffrin’s work to push back on a key point in his argument. While I agree that we must make it known that education inequality is everyone’s problem, this point that he makes contends with his focus on how our political institutions don’t *allow* us to successfully commit to this charge. I believe the language of what these reforms “allow us” or don’t “allow” us to do, takes the onus off the person in this charge. So, while it is the case that educational reforms make it more difficult for citizens to communicate their mutual regard to one another, how citizens act in response to laws that do not communicate our mutual regard matters, too.

Several questions arise from this concern. When these institutions fail to promote the mutual regard we have toward one another, what is our responsibility as citizens to each other? Moreover, if we need to recognize and make clear to our fellow citizens that educational inequality is everyone’s problem, what does it look like to be committed to this feat as members of a community despite potential roadblocks? I agree with the fact that school government reforms should not make it difficult to maintain our mutual regard for one another, but when our actions as members of a community do not challenge

these reforms, or at least the effects of these reforms, the injustice that does occur is perpetuated by our inaction. This can be seen in Shiffrin's account and through an example with Chicago Public Schools.

What Reid pulls from Shiffrin is about communicating mutual regard. Without communicating mutual regard to one another through democratic law, we are merely coexisting. In this model of merely coexisting, we see attitudes of indifference, grudging accommodation, and contempt.² Thus, we must communicate, through our words and actions, that there is mutual respect. Communication is fundamental in this program because, "When I make an intentional effort to convey my respect . . . my action is more meaningful than my leaving my respect to be assumed or inferred by you . . . I assume responsibility as an individual to affiliate myself with that respectful content, and I aim to ensure you know it matters enough to me that I exert my agency to convey it."³

This quote that I am pulling from Shiffrin is an important addition to Reid's analysis because it provides an answer to the questions posed earlier. In the communication of my mutual regard to my fellow citizens, I have a responsibility to affiliate myself with the respectful content of the law, and a responsibility to let my fellow citizens know that it matters enough to me that I act in ways that convey this care. Therefore, when the law is not communicating respectful content that shows my mutual regard to my fellow citizens, it follows that I have a responsibility to act in a way that conveys that it matters to me that my neighbor is disregarded. Shiffrin points to this in her description of political action. She states: "Protest and other, visible means of dissent work alongside voting and compliance . . . They render vivid, when necessary, that a particular law's claim to represent us may be especially precarious . . . and that it certainly does not represent the judgements of many of us as individuals."⁴ Especially in cases when the law is harming members of the community, when one does not act in ways that show that the law is not accurately representing their community, it follows that you either do agree with what the law is conveying and thus do not hold the people in your community as equals. Or it shows, through a lack of communication through discursive measures and action, that you are indifferent or contemptuous to the ways in which the law affects others.

It could be argued that Reid starts to get to this idea when he points to how school reformations encourage wealthy, white residents to view urban challenges as someone else's problem. However, rather than pointing to how these people could respond to these school reforms, he focuses on how these reformations can bar them from action. We can look to an example of a reformation to consider how wealthy, white residents could have responded. For this example, I look to Eve Ewing's study of South Side Chicago Schools in *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*.⁵ Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a fitting example of a conglomerate of schools that fall under mayoral control and is constantly accused of racial animus. As a result of this reformation, many schools faced closures so CPS could create/redirect funds to "selective enrollment" schools designed to attract the top academic (and top socioeconomic) tier of the city's high school students.⁶ The development of selective enrollment schools also means that families would have a "choice" about where to send their student, however, this school reform, like Reid notes, takes for granted the racially and economically segregated landscape of Chicago. Ewing notices this, too, stating that "Black parents' ability to truly choose may be hindered by limited access to transportation, information, and time, leaving them on the losing end of a supposedly fair marketplace."⁷ When a reform systemically disadvantages certain members of the community, that reform is not communicating to those individuals that they are held in mutual regard with everyone else or that they are equal.

Chicago is an example that shows that it's not the municipal boundary that bars a person from showing mutual regard, rather it is the choices and actions of the people who do not challenge the law when it does not show their mutual regard. While the system only supports schools that attract a more affluent, wealthy population, and if I happen to fall into that category, then I have the wherewithal to get my student in the "best school" and it doesn't affect me when local schools close. Nevertheless, there are people in my community who don't have the means to send their students elsewhere and have been relying on local, neighborhood public schools. Therefore, given that I have a responsibility to my fellow citizen, whom I respect and find to be my equal, if I don't act in ways that show them that this reform is not accurately representing

my mutual regard, then I am communicating that it's not my problem. That I am indifferent and contemptuous to the harms occurring in my community.

An immediate response to the concern that I am raising could be that these reforms limit the political will of citizens, and in that limitation these reforms don't allow citizens to dissent to what the law is conveying. Yet, when you see the ways Black communities rally around causes that have hurt their community, you see a historically disenfranchised group of individuals exercising their political will to show their mutual regard and assert their self-respect (Reid points to this, too). Thus, it is evident that when other members of the community see that the law is harming members of their community, members that are supposed to be co-authors and equals, and yet do not act in ways that show the law is not conveying their mutual regard, those members communicate indifference and contempt. In conclusion, if the purpose of democratic law is to make it known how each member of a community mutually regards and respects one another, when the law does not do this, then I have a responsibility to act in ways that challenge that law. When I don't, as a member of a community, I am telling those affected by the moral failing of the law that I don't care or that they are not equal to me. People have the power to convey their mutual regard and should be held responsible when they don't.

1 Ellis Reid, "Reforming School Governance in the Unequal Metropolis," *Philosophy of Education* 78 (same issue).

2 Seana Shiffrin, "Speaking Amongst Ourselves: Democracy and Law" (The Tanner Lecture on Human Values, UC Berkeley, 2017), 151.

3 Seana Shiffrin, 151.

4 Seana Shiffrin, 165-166.

5 Eve Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School and Closing on Chicago's South Side* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

6 Eve Ewing, 22.

7 Eve Ewing, 23.