

Rediscovering the Educating Forest Through the Prefacing Trees: Drawing Lessons from Barber's *Strong Democracy*

Tony DeCesare

St. Louis University

Samantha Deane's essay explores the idea of "prefacing as educating" by examining Benjamin Barber's three prefaces to his book *Strong Democracy*. She argues that Barber's prefaces educate readers in two ways. First, taken together, the prefaces "aim to teach the reader that utopian dream and pragmatist reality are not mutually exclusive; rather, when one takes the passage of time into account pragmatic, realistic utopias may demand constant prefaces." Second, and related to this, each preface "educates the reader on the status of the ideal" of strong democracy "amid criticisms and historic ironies by inviting the reader into the historical moment and reminding them that we are merely muddling through." While I applaud the originality of Deane's undertaking, I am unconvinced that she has done enough to defend the claim that Barber's prefaces are "in and of themselves educative." In particular, I worry that Deane's argument is undermined by a curious reading of Barber's prefaces. As a result, Deane's conclusions - while intriguing - strike me as premature.

To support her thesis, Deane discusses, first, the ways in which Barber's prefaces educate readers by taking into account "what history has revealed to be the limits of *Strong Democracy's* policy proposals." She focuses on Barber's tentative 1984 proposal for school vouchers, which he argued might have a place in a "strong democratic program."¹ However, as Deane points out, Barber expresses concerns in the 2003 preface about the rise of neoliberal ideology since the late 1980s. Neoliberalism coupled with thin democracy, Barber worries, leads to a situation in which even education gets treated as a "fit [subject] for marketization."²

One conclusion that Deane seems to draw from this part of the 2003 preface is that Barber's voucher proposal, while suited to the "real present" of 1984, is not suited to 2003. The "passage of time" - specifically, the rise of neoliberalism since 1984, coupled with the prevalence of thin democracy - has revealed to Barber that a voucher proposal cannot be part of a strong democratic agenda in 2003. Barber's preface, in turn, educates readers on this part of the ideal, which will have to be revised in light of new realities. The broader conclusion here for Deane is that this is the fate of pragmatic, realistic utopias like Barber's strong democracy: they require constant re-prefacing in light of what history reveals, and by engaging in such re-prefacing - and, thereby, inviting readers into the historical moment - authors of such utopias educate readers.

It is not clear, however, that Barber's 2003 preface is actually educating readers in either of these ways. For one thing, as Deane notes, the 2003 preface does not *explicitly* discuss the voucher proposal, even as it calls our attention to the advances of neoliberalism and the prevalence of thin democracy. To be fair, Barber does suggest in that preface that the rise of neoliberalism in a thin democracy creates a climate

in which even public responsibilities such as education increasingly are outsourced to the private sector. Thus, we might, with Deane, assume that Barber is *implicitly* calling for a revision to - or even outright rejection of - his 1984 voucher proposal in light of the "real present" of 2003 and, therefore, that this preface is educating us in that sense. But I think this assumption rests on a misreading of Barber. The institutional reform agenda proposed in Chapter 10 of the 2003 edition is not predicated on the "razing of liberal [or thin] democracy."³ Instead, it is a set of realistic strategies for change, that is, an integrated but incremental approach to strong(er) democracy. Furthermore, Barber is clear that these reforms must always take into account and "deal concretely with the obstacles that modernity appears to place in the way of participation."⁴ This is the spirit in which Barber tentatively puts forth the voucher proposal as part of the institutionalization of strong democracy. It is one potential means through which we can "re-orient democracy toward participation."⁵ Finally, he acknowledges in the text the dangers of "voucher schemes undertaken in a climate of antigovernment privatism,"⁶ and he cautions readers about "the origins of the idea in laissez-faire liberalism and Friedmanite libertarianism"⁷ - both of which are forerunners to the neoliberal ideology discussed in the 2003 preface.

The point is that already in 1984 Barber was aware that his strong democratic agenda would have to be implemented under less-than-ideal conditions. The conditions may, indeed, have become less ideal by 2003, and the most recent preface certainly seems to alert us to those new conditions. But this is not, to my mind, sufficient grounds on which to conclude that Barber is calling for a revision of the ideal, or that his 2003 preface is educating readers on the status of the ideal in light of what history has revealed. Indeed, I see no reason - at least none offered by Deane - to think that Barber would not continue to encourage experiments with vouchers in the "real present" of 2003, or even 2016. Deane states that Barber's "school voucher program was only advanced as part of a package of strong democratic reforms in 1984 because in many ways public schools were failing to be public." Well, the general corruption of the "public" character of our schools, which motivated Barber's voucher proposal in the first place, has continued to plague us ever since. As long as a voucher scheme has the potential to improve the public character of schools and thereby promote strong democracy, then Barber is likely to continue to argue that it is "surely a reform worth considering."⁸

Thus, while Barber's 2003 preface clearly invites readers into the historical moment, it is not clear what Deane means when she claims that the preface therefore educates readers about the status of the 1984 voucher proposal (and the ideal more broadly). Is it that the context in which we might implement a voucher scheme has changed? If so, Deane has simply stated a truism (we hardly need a new preface to "educate" us on this point). Or, is it that we must forgo the possibility of vouchers being part of the strong democratic agenda in the "real present" of 2003? If so, Deane has not provided sufficient evidence that Barber himself has learned, or is teaching, that lesson.

Deane then argues that criticisms of Barber help to "clarify the educative importance of his prefaces." To make the point, she focuses, first, on Young's criticism that

Barber's faith in participation is impractical - that nobody can participate all the time in all the decisions that affect their lives. According to Deane, Barber had already addressed a version of this criticism prior to Young's 1996 critique. In Barber's 1990 preface, he says that citizens of a strong democracy "need not participate all of the time in all public affairs, but they should participate at least some of the time in at least some public affairs."⁹ On the strength of this example, Deane makes the broader point that Barber's 1990 preface reflects his consideration of criticism of his participatory ideal and, thus, it serves to educate the reader on the status of that ideal amid such criticism.

But I worry that Deane has again misread Barber's prefaces.¹⁰ She tells us that only in 1990 did Barber soften strong democracy's requirement concerning direct participation. Yet in the original preface, Barber made clear that "strong democracy" demands that citizens "govern themselves in at least some public matters at least some of the time."¹¹ This language is strikingly similar to that used in 1990. And so, again, it is not clear how Barber's 1990 preface is, at least in the way Deane claims, educating readers. Rather than help us to reimagine the ideal in light of criticism, this preface seems simply to reemphasize a point Barber had already made in 1984.

On the whole, Deane has not provided sufficient evidence that Barber's prefaces educate readers in the ways she suggests. (Nor has she demonstrated, moreover, that they are really unique in any way. What do they do beyond what prefaces are, by definition, expected to do?) And I'm left wondering, therefore, why Deane is pressing us to consider these prefaces as educative in the first place. More to the point, I'm worried that Deane has lost the educating forest through the prefacing trees. And so, in closing, I want to suggest that we think of Barber's prefaces not as educative "in and of themselves," but rather as helping to facilitate the education we experience through a close engagement with Barber's content and method, both of which have helped to make *Strong Democracy* an important and influential work of political theory. It is in the text itself, I think, where we still find - perhaps with some guidance from the prefaces - Barber's deepest and most enduring lessons.

1. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 294.

2. *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

3. *Ibid.*, 262.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 263.

6. *Ibid.*, 264.

7. *Ibid.*, 296.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, xxix.

10. Deane apparently revised this section sometime after receiving my initial response. In the revised version - presented at the 2016 PES conference - she acknowledged that Barber's 1984 and 1990 prefaces do make essentially the same point regarding participation. Thus, my criticism that Deane has literally misread Barber loses some of its force. However, I still worry that Deane's use of Young in relation to Barber does not serve the purpose she intends. After all, it is not clear how Barber's 1984 and 1990

prefaces could be understood as responding to a 1996 critique from Young and, thereby, as educating readers on the status of the ideal "amid criticisms." If Deane is using Young's critique as representative of similar but earlier critiques - which I assumed above - I would suggest going back to those earlier critiques instead or, at least, engaging with Young's more thorough discussion of these issues, as found, for instance, in *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. *Ibid.*, xxxiv.