

# Education for Civil Society

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I argue that the education of children as individual persons should be subordinate to their education as members of democratic civil society. First, the extensive practices of cooperation and mutual support in civil society, for which preparation through education is a primary social vehicle, is demanded by the present social, economic, and political context. Second, democratic civil society has a distinctive “moral economy,” where economy simply means the exchange of goods and services, which is distinct from the market economy in five specific respects, which I will elaborate. Third, four differentiating criteria between the two economies are elaborated, namely Service, Community Reciprocity, Social Goods, and Moral Norms. Finally, these criteria are viewed as the characteristics of education for participation in civil society different from the individualist drive for “productive citizenship” intended to serve the needs of the market economy. There are two important disclaimers to note at the outset: 1) This conceptual apparatus will require development and a strong empirical base; and 2) “moral economy” here differs from its common use as “good” behavior in the market economy.

## THE CONTEXT

In 2009, Francis Schrag provided a critique of the idealistic nostrums found in parental moral education of children, on the basis that such practice ignores the reality of vice and viciousness that many children face in their communities and that schools should also help them to handle.<sup>1</sup> Schrag’s approach indicates that, in bad times and even in good, educational thought and practice can be situated, strongly grounded, and contextually realistic. For, although Bernard Williams claims that “... it is an ethological truth that human beings

live under culture,"<sup>22</sup> making intelligible our ideas of the past and our conceptions of ideas that we have, those cultures and the insights they produce are not merely humanist or scientific, as he suggests, but abruptly social, political, and economic. Speculative ventures about a post-humanist age bypass these aspects of society in this era at their peril.

Inherited cultures are possessions of communities, however described, not of individuals. For living as an individual person is to stand and live in relation to others in one's community, and in civil society, with its wide-ranging networks, implying, as does Williams' ethological truth, the experience of education.<sup>3</sup> Yet contemporary processes of education manifest the "formal individualism" he describes, narrowly defined as individual success in a capitalist world, also found in versions of character education. However, peer collaboration in school apart, the child's presence in any particular group, say an AP Physics class, is determined by the dominance of individual choice and positional goods as the primary criteria. The education of the individual is entrenched as the salient target, supported no doubt by important claims about children's rights.<sup>4</sup> Yet problems facing communities require a robust civil society with widespread participation if they are to be coherently tackled.<sup>5</sup> Crudely, we hang together or we hang separately.

The rhetorical context for modern educational practice, then, seems to be one of a "shining city on a hill," in which all will have a place as productive citizens and "be the best they can be." Given that, in the USA, "no national institution is left that can accurately be described as democratic," this is arguably a mythical context and an unrealizable ambition for the reality of the world today, considering all the struggles with social justice it would require.<sup>6</sup>

First, polarization undermines civil society by making reasoned discourse difficult to achieve. Truth as a regulative ideal (and reason with it) is being discarded, leaving no vehicle but violence for solving disputes. Socially, not only adults but also school children now feel permitted to freely use racial insults.<sup>7</sup> Polls indicate that 34% of Americans would prefer authoritarian strong leadership to democratic politics. And so, cracks in civil society widen.<sup>8</sup> Such polarization in less established democratic polities invites the spread of autocracy

in illiberal democracies, such as Hungary and Poland, and former democracies such as the Philippines.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the power of automation in “the second machine age” implies that labor will continue to be devalued in relation to capital, leaving those who are not already rich with no labor to sell. High-income employment will become increasingly rare, making the American Dream an illusion, if not a nightmare.<sup>10</sup> Social and economic inequality is gathering pace,<sup>11</sup> yielding a continuing loss of educational opportunity for children living in poverty.<sup>12</sup> For the capitalist impulse, the light by which the child as would-be productive citizen is guided, is devoted primarily to the creation of individual wealth, protected by markets, and manifest in such physical phenomena as the gated sub-division and the concentration of elites in certain suburbs.

Third, there is a group of inter-dependent problems. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization predicts up to 122 million *more* people will be living in extreme poverty by 2030 as a result of climate change.<sup>13</sup> Hunger in the Global South is a matter of affordability, not scarcity, as speculative commodity trading, *inter alia*, increases the price of basic foods, such as rice and wheat, by as much as 20%.<sup>14</sup> However, with medical improvements, the population of the planet will rise on present trends by almost 20% by 2050, because of Western humans’ longevity rates. Western children will live to the age of ninety and beyond. In addition, the re-emergence of tribalism in Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism is matched by Western tribalist reactions to immigration and the refugee crises which, given poverty and hunger, is likely continue to increase, not diminish.

This catalogue of challenges is new to governments worldwide and to democratic civil society. Yet democratic governments promote this self-regarding individualist view of education—the productive citizen—on behalf of the market economy, sharpening income distinctions and ignoring the need for community integration to offset social dis-integration. The discourse of educational policy with its public vocabulary has slipped from the neo-behaviorism of Thorndike to pseudo-managerial talk, making rich descriptions of educational purpose difficult to articulate in the public square.<sup>15</sup> Problem-solving or critical thinking,

for example, have become just useful tools for employment, not descriptive of sophisticated analysis in the humanities and social and natural sciences.

Robert Putnam has illustrated how the patterns of civil society are succumbing to formal individualism: we are “bowling alone,” not in leagues.<sup>16</sup> Under threat we tend to “hunker down” and abandon the norms and networks of civil society.<sup>17</sup> Instead of civil society being pluralist, behaviors are singularist.<sup>18</sup> Instead of individuals having the varied interests common in civil society, the pressure is to conform to political or ideological norms, qua individuals, not in social communities, deepening polarization. The context for education is not, therefore, a broadly peaceful body politic in which, with due effort, each individual can proceed to a fulfilled life. The search for David Norton’s “meaningful work and meaningful living” is becoming elusive.<sup>19</sup> Dewey’s conception of democracy as a social idea, where the “clear consciousness of a communal life with all its implications constitutes the idea of democracy,” seems an anachronism and irrelevant to educational policy.<sup>20</sup> However, these challenges might be practically resolved if the norms of civil society were sustained and enhanced; if the young were prepared for participation, the framework of civil society within which individual desires are accommodated could be sustained.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY, GOVERNMENT, AND THE MARKET ECONOMY

Too much focus on democratic government encourages us to diminish the sense of our place as citizens in civil society, of which family and the multiple possible forms of association possible are the most noticeable elements. Boundaries between civil society and government shift,<sup>21</sup> but from the viewpoint of the state, civil society follows De Tocqueville’s description of associations as the pursuit of desires in common.<sup>22</sup> Government offers protection and has a monopoly of force to secure it, but it regulates only certain aspects of our lives, e.g. there are legal rules about driving a car but not about where people travel to, for which neither the law nor government is in control or responsible. Civil society (and our sub-cultures) is where we live, even if the quality of life in impoverished neighborhoods is threatening and violent.<sup>23</sup> It is a separate

sphere from government and from the market economy, though there will be interactions between all three.<sup>24</sup> Activities in civil society are as varied as human needs and imaginations, including protest and demands for legislation. Organizations develop rules that make explicit member obligations. Commitment is partial, as needs are diverse and pluralist. A woman can be a member of a choir, a Yankees supporter, a Sunday School teacher, a mother, and a member of Planned Parenthood. Unlike citizenship, which is generally a stable aspect of life, membership in different organizations is diverse, changing, and unpredictable for any individual. Civil society has a complex function, therefore, not least because our individual desires contribute to our personal identity. It becomes a “moralized terrain of voluntary cooperation and personal development.”<sup>25</sup> Government can be a patron and a partner: but its role in education increasingly dominates civil society, where the little red schoolhouse, and indeed the public university, used to be located.

## THE MARKET ECONOMY AND THE MORAL ECONOMY

However, the market economy does not dominate civil society and its organizations in terms of the exchange of goods and services. Civil society operates within what is here called a moral economy, not driven by the norms of the market economy. Our life in civil society is not conducted primarily on market principles, of profit or greed, but on norms of trust, friendship, shared responsibilities, and in the family commitment to the intrinsic value of the other, as a human being, not as a customer. No organization is, of course, unaffected by human frailties.

Figure 1 indicates this conceptualization of the two economies, notwithstanding the fact of hybrid forms and the ensuing need to develop a robust empirical base for this analysis. The central feature of the *moral economy* is the exchange of goods and services *not for profit*. While we must avoid reductionism, the differences are clear. First, the basic incentive of the market economy is self-interest. The basic incentive of the moral economy is reciprocal service. Second, the market economy relies on market reciprocity, i.e., playing the rules

of the market without consideration for others, qua persons. Nobody in the big store cares if the small stores go out of business. The moral economy, on the other hand, celebrates community reciprocity, where each person serves and is served in the multitude of ways that people gain satisfaction. A camping trip, for instance, cannot be run on the principles of the market economy where individuals putting up tents, doing the cooking, or catching the fish, charge the others for their services.<sup>26</sup> Third, currencies in the market economy are forms of money, cash, derivatives, etc.

Figure 1:

The Market Economy	The Moral Economy
1. Self-interest	1. Not for profit and/or service: goods as mutually satisfying experiences
2. Market reciprocity: incentives	2. Community reciprocity: social preferences
3. Currencies (cash, derivatives, mortgages, etc)	3. Free exchange of service: bartering
4. Personal wealth, individual property, and capital	4. Social goods and social capital
5. Legal norms (contract)	5. Moral norms (trust, civic virtue)

Currencies in the moral economy include cash, but not for personal wealth, and exchanges take myriad forms, barter or gifts, such as one camper's Land Rover being used for transport. Civil society associations will need subscriptions to operate, but an association is not driven by profit. Fourth, individual purpose in the market economy is income, personal wealth, and capital. Yet Adam Smith's description of the public good as the combined satisfactions of individuals in the market economy neglects that good as constituted in the *connections* among individuals, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from such connections.<sup>27</sup> This is the embodiment of civic virtue, not seen as the individual's property, but located in a network of reciprocal social relations.<sup>28</sup>

#### FOUR CRITERIA FROM THE MORAL ECONOMY FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Four of the five criteria that characterize the moral economy are lightly filled out here, namely *Service*, *Community Reciprocity*, *Social Goods*, and *Moral Norms*, putting *Currencies* to one side, before indicating their implications for educational practice.

*Service* is conceptually dependent on the intrinsic motivation to help others, often described as altruism, quite distinct from service in the market economy, e.g., of a waiter in a restaurant. That motivation is of two general types: to promote another's good, or to prevent their injury. Innumerable associations embody this stance to others, from *Médicins sans Frontières* to the staff in the local homeless shelter. "Pure" altruism is the stuff of saints and heroes, but service implies here a more "mundane" altruism where "pure" motives are mixed with self-interest, e.g., where a non-profit staffer receives a salary. Another might be where altruistic acts are mixed with self-concept and personal identity. Another might be straightforward well-being<sup>29</sup> achieved through service, or as a struggle for self-mastery.<sup>30</sup> Built into service in the moral economy, then, are a) the common rather than the individual good, and b) pursuing that good for its own sake, but with the expectation that motives will be mixed. Satisfactions from service can be as humdrum and as varied as packing boxes of clothing for Haitians, or umpiring a Little League game.

*Community Reciprocity* describes the *context* of service. Samuel Bowles analyzes the relationship between incentives and moral motivations through discussion of a series of experimental games, such as the Prisoner's Dilemma, and through empirical studies of groups in non-experimental settings. "Motives such as reciprocity, generosity and trust are common and these preferences may be crowded out by the use of explicit incentives,"<sup>31</sup> which may be instrumental or self-regarding. (Reciprocity in the market economy is between buyer and seller, governed by an agreed price.) The pursuit of desires in common will be diminished where there are incentives that focus on the individual, e.g., doing what is needed to get Joe to "buy into" community service. Thus, community reciprocity minimally describes the interactions embodied in pursuit of the

common goal. Individual goals, though not individual opinions about how to achieve the goals, are sublimated to the common task. Where individual incentives are offered, Bowles suggests, disengagement from community reciprocity will occur, especially where individuals believe they cannot respond well enough to get the rewards implicit in the incentive, or because other individuals seek to control the agenda as their own, not as a communal enterprise.<sup>32</sup> Incentives can undermine community reciprocity by diminishing an individual's motivation to undertake the task.

*Social Goods* are constitutive of social capital, and are distinct from individual positional goods.<sup>33</sup> Social goods are desired for the benefit of a given community but not necessarily for those who are engaged in constructing them, as with a homeless shelter or non-profit organizations, for example. Social goods are services, e.g., the homeless are sheltered, but also are constitutive of the embodiment of the quality of the community involved, e.g. the volunteers collaborate, develop friendships, and other common interests that contribute to their well-being. Social goods may also, of course, contribute to the health of the market economy, indicating that the two economies have important interrelations and overlaps. Social capital, as Putnam points out, benefits the market economy as it facilitates market relationships: I need a plumber, and a friend in my choir has a brother who is a plumber. But in the moral economy, to repeat, all relationships are viewed as social property, although they may also be of individual benefit to the agents, somewhat analogous to *eleutheria* (individual and collective freedom) in fifth-century Athens. Social goods developed through the moral economy are more than the sum of their parts, the contributions of various individuals.

*Moral Norms* provide the moral base of promises implicit in legal contract and, in aspiration, generate the limited sense of trust needed for market transactions. While the complexities and pernicious aspects of the market economy are well-known, e.g. price-gouging, monopolistic behaviors, that economy is inoperable without this moral base. Such moral considerations are acquired *independently* of and *prior to* the practices of the market economy. Indeed, civil society can be a vehicle for controlling its worst excesses, as historical



movements to abolish slavery illustrate. Moreover, individuals working in the market economy frequently find the demands of the business culture to be in radical contrast to the moral norms with which they have been brought up in the two main institutions of civil society, the family and religious institutions.<sup>34</sup> Civil society associations and organizations, however, simply disintegrate without those moral norms embedded in constructive collaboration, such as trust and friendship, the absence of deceit, respect for others and their opinions and needs, and such prudential norms as persistence in working at relationships so that they do not atrophy.

### EDUCATION FOR THE MORAL ECONOMY

These four criteria suggest implications for all levels of education, but let us consider high schools. First, studies show that many undergraduates are neither intellectually nor emotionally ready for college or university.<sup>35</sup> My experience of teaching around 200 undergraduates annually confirms that diagnosis. Moreover, students who have not undertaken International Baccalaureate (IB) or several Advanced Placement (AP) courses regularly report that their senior year was an intellectual desert, which, if true, represents an extraordinary waste of public money. In one class, 80% agreed with that claim. Pat Hersch claims that high school students primarily find the comradeship of their peers to be the major benefit of compulsory education, though more empirical studies are needed.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is not more citizenship education that is required; rather, alterations in the conduct and practices of contemporary education to promote a coherent civil society are needed. Based on the analysis in this article, I outline some directions that might be pursued.

First, school work. *All* curriculum content teaching and learning might be conducted as non-self-regarding activities. That is, students' work might be unstintingly collaborative in character; not merely by being group work, but by emphasizing *deliberative* process for students.<sup>37</sup> Individual success, important as it is, would thus be apparent only within a shared context of work, now relatively simple due to the available technology. This implies changes in assessments

too, particularly at the AP or IB level. Collaborative work would include the disciplines, but extend into service to others to form a primary part of the curriculum, couched in intensive communal study. The model of young scientists working on a local environmental problem could be replicated throughout all aspects of high school. The emphasis is on reasoned discourse in the civil society of classrooms to which the pursuit of positional goods is secondary.

Second, grading. Grades are incentives, not merely assessments. Educators have long been puzzled by the fact that as children grow older they appear to lose their kindergarten enthusiasm for school. Yet grade incentives “crowd out” intrinsic motivation and the achievement of what Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood describe as “love of knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> The phenomenon of grade inflation thus might be explained not merely in terms of students’ desire for individual success and positional goods, often also by browbeating teachers, but in terms of mistaken attempts by teachers to distribute incentives that become progressively worthless in terms of the individual’s intrinsic motivation. In a group deliberative context, too, high school writing might develop rhetoric and the arts of persuasion in argument as opposed to recapitulation.

Third, mutual care. The school as a community might take a strong collaborative approach to the social challenges individual (usually poor) children face, by creating systems that include teachers and student peers to stimulate the affective responses common in “mundane” altruism, and operationalize support. The account of David in Putnam’s book is instructive: he was a felon at 14, was ignored by teachers and counselors, and his parents were drug addicts. Yet, at 16, he has taken responsibility for young siblings and step-siblings.<sup>39</sup> Many students are well aware of the needs of others such as David and the problems they face: the moral norms of schooling could extend into emotional and practical support to address the various forms of distress the child faces. Though privacy is a clear issue, reinforcing the sense of community support across barriers of wealth and ability might reduce alienation from education and diminish the animosities of peer culture rivalry, paradoxically rooted in the search for individual identity.

Fourth, school play. American high schools seem to ignore or sideline

one major opportunity for building the skills and aptitudes for civil society, notwithstanding the presence of choirs, orchestras, or theater. In prestigious school sports only the elite student gets the privilege of play: there are no games for the fourth basketball team. This cuts off a primary arena for teamwork and mutual activity; “play” is central to the common human experience, but is not apparent in American school curricula. Many children in high schools lack any experience of working in a team at such non-serious endeavors. As the enticements of professional sports glitter, so the incentives built into sports success are rich, and the education system trots along behind, supported by universities. But those children who enjoy sport, but are assessed as not good enough for “varsity,” experience disenchantment, disillusion, and loss of interest and motivation when they are rejected. They become spectators: being a fan seems a premier constituent in modern personal identity, as alienated soccer hooligans demonstrate.

Fifth, the plural society. Community reciprocity might demand engagement across grade levels and all age barriers created in the institution of the American school, not unlike the sense of mutual responsibility apparent in Marine Corps culture.<sup>40</sup> This is not to argue for tracking according to ability, which represents formal individualism at work. Rather, all age groups would be part of the life of the school’s curriculum as it would embrace members of the community as well, for example, in a school choir or an orchestra. The mother described earlier illustrates one of the intriguing benefits of civil society: its pluralism. Yet schools tend to be singularist, with very constrained opportunities for pluralism, irregularly confined to grade level, or to elites, determined by the school. The pep rally is a sentimental substitute. Legions of disaffected children only have contact with the school system through a given curriculum that provides little or no motivational engagement.

## CONCLUSION

While none of these suggestions are particularly new, they suggest lines of enquiry that will build the experience and the habits of engagement

in multi-variate civil society to open up choices of social rather than positional goods for children. Building social capital needs urgently to be the educational, political, and social purpose, without neglecting the intellectual and emotional development of individual children, given our contemporary context. But individual capital is secondary, nested within collaborative endeavor. However, a brief article such as this is insufficient to provide a fully robust argument. Obvious and not so obvious questions remain, including whether this line of argument is worth pursuing.

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