

Hirsch's Pluralism Problem: The Continued Struggle to Understand Diversity and Difference in the United States

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WHO IS THE “WE” AND THE “OUR”?

Thanks to Kenneth Driggers for his thoughtful and engaging paper.¹ As I hope will be obvious, my response is intended in the spirit of extension and augmentation and not primarily critique. I will jump right into this response with a claim by E.D. Hirsch that Driggers notes that I can agree with, namely, that a problem with elementary education is that it is too individualized. The idea that learning how to be part of a group and understand, appreciate, and become attuned to the lives of others has the potential to greatly improve public schooling, especially schooling in and for a democracy. One mistake Hirsch makes, however, is his persistent implicit assumption that some version of the Western canon is “neutral” enough to be reasonably interesting and relevant for all. At the level of curriculum, this looks like the kinds of arguments educators and academics are having about culturally relevant curriculum, etcetera. Relatedly, at the societal level, this thinking shows up when White people or the otherwise privileged magnanimously invite recent immigrants and other marginalized/minoritized people to participate in the American Dream and to “become” American. Of course, the privileged often do so without any recognition of the irony that whatever America is, it is most certainly the product of those on the social/cultural margins making contributions to the broader culture, thus changing the very meaning of the idea of what it means to be “American.” A greater irony is the selective memory at play here and how many of the fragile, threatened privileged—desperate to defend American culture from the influx of foreign cultures via immigration—fail to recognize that their family trees are likely full of immigrants and that without the constant contributions of immigrant culture, there would be no “America” as we know it.²

Although not as wholly optimistic as I was when I was younger (can anyone relate?), I still see glimmers of possibility that we can work toward real-

izing the promise and dream of a multiracial, plural, and diverse democracy. Of course, democracy is not a static destination. Doing the work needed to attempt to bring about a just, equitable, and inclusive society—in addition to helping us to get closer to it—can transform society by helping our citizens practice democracy, better see others, and get beyond the neoliberal preoccupation with selfish individualism by highlighting communal aspects of the American Dream. And thus, I have finished this introduction by working back to what I do agree with Hirsch about, namely that hyper-individualized schooling experiences do not lend themselves to meaningful education for democracy.

HOW TO EDUCATE FOR DEMOCRACY

At the outset, Driggers explains: “because the timing of his [Hirsch’s] latest publication coincides with the passage of ‘patriotic civics education’ bills in states such as Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, and Georgia, Hirsch’s philosophy of education deserves further scrutiny. While a direct link between Hirsch and civics education bills cannot be drawn, it is evident that a rhetorical commonality exists between them.” I definitely see the connections of which Driggers writes and I’d like to add to them: Hirsch’s approach is very narrowly cognitive and lacking depth. The recent civics push from the right seeks to head off teaching kids to *do* civics, instead encouraging them simply to learn *about* it (often in narrowly cognitive ways). The recent attacks on “action civics” from the right typify this effort to limit active and engaged learning.³ A very charitable read of these maneuvers is that proponents see learning about civics instead of how to do civics as a way to level the playing field in a Hirschian, cultural literacy sort of way, as everyone gets access to the same knowledge about our democracy. That it also happens that this aversion to practicing democracy in schools seems very likely to discourage future citizens from knowing how to participate in social movements and agitating for change is just the icing on cake, so to speak. Or is it? I often write about the potential for school math and democratic education to co-relate. I have developed a theory and practice that I label democratic mathematics education.⁴ I bring this up here because of its relationship to critical mathematics education (CME), which is basically the application of a Freirean critical pedagogy to math class.⁵ While differing in

some ways, the democratic approach shares a bit of underlying philosophy and a fair amount of pedagogy with CME. On the one hand, I saw the writing on the wall years ago and, in part, named my vision for school math “democratic” because in polite company it is hard to be against democracy in a way that it is not hard to be against Freirean liberatory education.⁶

To go a bit deeper (and more confessionally), I did not just see the label of democratic math as a more palatable approach, PR-wise; I also am of the belief that it guards against some of the potential problems that can come from overreaching by some critically-oriented educators, whereby they directly *tell* their students what sort of issues and problems to care, learn about, and ultimately act on. My fear is that at its worst, this kind of education is just substituting one orthodoxy for another. While I share with many of these critical educators a similar vision of what a more just world would look like, as well as the belief that schools should play a role in social change, we part ways about the kind of education that is most likely to help bring that world into being. The democratic, action-civics-oriented approach, while less direct, seems more likely to foster the kind of genuine care and development of student voice in ways that has promise to produce ethical, caring, and agential citizens who can act on the world. The recent rage against action civics and other related developments has me convinced that this firestorm is likely to touch democratic math education in the near term and that I need to be prepared to argue for what I believe in. This leads me back to Driggers’s argument.

USEFUL LENSES THROUGH WHICH TO VIEW U.S. SOCIETY

I am hoping that the connections between my response thus far and Driggers’s critique of Hirsch are clear enough, but what of Heidegger and Peirce? For a time, I struggled with how Driggers’s engagement with Heidegger and Peirce helps with the problems Hirsch creates related to civics education, but I have come to really appreciate his argument. In the end, I think that my trouble linking the philosophical and political aspects of Driggers’s argument is mostly reflective of my own periodic existential crises as a philosopher worrying about philosophy’s relevance to practice and not related to Driggers’s fine paper. In it, he makes clear that Heidegger is, in fact, very useful in diagnosing the problem

with Hirsch's harsh binary thinking between one culture and another and between language and "reality." Hirsch's idea that our tribes necessarily divide us and prevent understanding is not necessarily true. In fact, as alluded to above, Hirsch's idea seems to almost pathologically underappreciate the role of diversity in the creation of whatever shared culture we ought to be promoting in schools.

Peirce is very helpful in pointing out how Hirsch completely misses the possibilities for how cultural difference can be an engine of progress, knowledge, wisdom, understanding-building, etcetera. As Driggers notes, "Hirsch discounts the extent that *all* existence, particularly all *human* existence, is predicated on the same wellspring of reality from which . . . fundamentally different languages arise." Peirce's point is fundamental to efforts to re-understand diversity in the U.S. in a way that acknowledges and maybe even embraces the possibilities that the dynamic tension between the sameness and difference in our society can lead to social improvement that will help us to get better at being a plural, diverse, but integrated people. The worry about this approach is that integration is a problem that spans all of society and I am not sure that turning to Peirce or Heidegger and their arcane work will do too much to cure this malady. This worry is certainly no reason to stop trying to make this case and Driggers's work can serve as one foundation for such efforts.

REFERENCES

1 Kenneth Driggers, "Teaching the Between: Hirsch, Heidegger, and Peirce," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 3 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.47925/79.3.110>

2 There is a still deeper irony, that the only reasoned argument that can be made for the existence of a "true," and "original" culture in America has to set aside the European influence that all too often is thought of as synonymous with America and instead turns toward those who were here prior to European colonization.

3 Anthony Ives, "Action Civics Should be Celebrated, Not Banned," *The Constitutionalist*, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://theconstitutionalist.org/2021/07/26/action-civics-should-be-celebrated-not-banned>.

4 For this version of democratic mathematics education, see Stenhagen, Kurt, and Catherine Henney. *Democracy and mathematics education: Rethinking school math for our troubled times*. Routledge, 2021.

5 Gutstein provides the clearest articulation of this approach. See Gutstein, Eric. *Reading and writing the world with mathematics: Toward a pedagogy for social justice*. Routledge, 2012.

6 At least it was hard to be overtly against democracy prior to the Trump era. See <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22274429/republicans-anti-democracy-13-charts>.