

## Education for Critical Democracy and Compassionate Globalization

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In reflecting on the dilemmas of globalization, Nicholas Burbules and Carlos Torres ask, “is globalization merely deleterious, or are there positive features associated with its practices and dynamics?”<sup>1</sup> This is certainly a difficult question; globalization is very complex and complicated and there is little consensus on its contours, dimensions, and impact. Among educators, it is largely unexplored. Most of my students and colleagues have little idea about the meaning of globalization, and critical conversations about it are conspicuously absent in prevailing educational reform proposals. Similarly, while some educational philosophers have been writing about globalization, it has not significantly affected how we think about our larger purposes or our field of study. Yet globalization has many negative consequences that ought to trouble us, and even make us rethink our passions and priorities. For example, it is not hard to show that the unfettered expansion of free-market capitalism, a defining feature of globalization, has made the suffering and social injustice in our world markedly worse. We see growing gaps between the wealthy and the poor, loss of job security, exploitation of workers, privatization of public goods and services, environmental destruction, diminishment of biodiversity, disruption of indigenous cultures, loss of community, increased global homogenization, and ultimately, the almost complete subordination of the developing world to the needs and desires of transnational corporations.

While the devastating environmental and human costs of globalization disproportionately affect citizens of poorer countries, they are not limited to them; the poor in wealthy countries face similarly bleak and insecure futures, especially when their jobs have been exported overseas. We can also see an increased sense of alienation and meaninglessness, and a loss of compassion, as people become increasingly seduced by hyperconsumptive, materialistic, greedy, and self-centered ways of being. Describing the deleterious impact of globalization, former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide writes that

behind the crisis of dollars there is a human crisis: among the poor, immeasurable human suffering; among the others, the powerful, the policymakers, a poverty of spirit which has made a religion of the market and its invisible hand. A crisis of imagination so profound that the only measure of value is profit, the only measure of human progress is economic growth.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is also positive potential within globalization. For example, there is more talk around the world about the meaning and importance of democracy, as well as a more widespread “belief in ‘human rights’ and the growth of organizations attempting to monitor and protect them.”<sup>3</sup> We have previously unimaginable technology that allows us to communicate easily and quickly with others, to document abuses and suffering, to share ideas and resources, and to develop social justice networks and coalitions. And surely for some people, the benefits of capitalist expansion have trickled down, resulting in a higher everyday standard of living.

Whether the positives of globalization outweigh the negatives is an open question, even as I write. Yet we have choices about how we respond to the world around us; in fact, our unfinishedness is one of the things that makes us human. Paulo Freire suggests that recognition of this unfinishedness is essential to social justice efforts and to living ethical lives; only when we believe that the future can be different from the past, and that we can intervene in ways that improve the world, do we make more conscious choices about how we want to live. He writes that

what makes men and women ethical is their capacity to “spiritualize” the world, to make it either beautiful or ugly. Their capacity to intervene, to compare, to judge, to decide, to choose, to desist makes them capable of acts of greatness, of dignity, and, at the same time, of the unthinkable in terms of indignity.<sup>4</sup>

Globalization is not a fixed phenomenon; rather, it is an ongoing project that presents us with many options, possibilities, and paths. Sadly, the overriding *de facto* response of many educators to globalization is to do little beyond adapt to the changes underway, accepting the fatalistic belief that few alternatives are possible. I think we can do better than this. If one of the rallying cries of globalization is that it allows for the spread of democracy, we ought to intervene to ensure, for example, that what is spread is our most idealistic and robust vision of democracy, not a narrow and crude version of individualism and market rule. Historically, many philosophers of education have written passionately about the meaning of democracy and the role of schools in helping to cultivate critical citizenship. These rich conceptions provide us with resources that speak to our current era. Moreover, rethinking democracy in light of the dilemmas of globalization is crucial if we hope to live up to our own best visions. Wayne Ellwood writes that within the challenge and “crisis of globalization,” there “is a unique opportunity for addressing core issues of democracy.”<sup>5</sup> It thus seems important that we bring our richest democratic thinking to bear on the phenomenon of globalization.

Educators, including educational philosophers, have not spent enough time thinking about the challenges and possibilities of globalization, even though it is perhaps the defining reality of our era. Douglas Kellner argues that we need to develop a critical theory of globalization “that reproaches those aspects that are oppressive while seizing upon opportunities to fight domination and exploitation and to promote democratization, justice, and a progressive reconstruction of the polity, society, and culture.”<sup>6</sup> Revitalizing talk about democracy in education, both what it means and how we live up to our own best visions in schools and society, is one important aspect of this emergent critical theory of globalization. We need to better envision a democracy relevant to our current era, and cultivate the habits and dispositions necessary for it to flourish. This essay is a modest effort in this direction. I first provide a brief overview of globalization, both its dark side and its democratic potential. I then connect this democratic potential, often most present in grassroots globalization from below, to contemporary work that aims to revitalize democratic purposes in schools. Building on this work, I offer a preliminary vision for a more robust and responsive democracy, one that helps us to challenge passivity and apathy, hold elites accountable, and cultivate justice-oriented global citizens. I end

by arguing that in an era of rapid globalization, it is imperative that we reawaken democratic sensibilities and imagination, especially within education.

#### GLOBALIZATION AND DEMOCRACY

It is incredibly challenging to briefly describe globalization and explore its intersections with democracy. Though it is now a widely used concept, there is still much ambiguity in the literature about what it means. Usually only my international students have any understanding of the dynamics of globalization; the understanding of the rest of them is typically superficial and confused. This is not surprising. Burbules and Torres write that despite the major global shifts occurring over the last several decades, “there still remain significant disagreements about the nature and extent of this thing called ‘globalization.’ The more that we know about it, the greater the uncertainties about the consequences it brings with it.”<sup>7</sup> I provide some broad descriptive strokes, though hopefully provocative ones, not to definitively characterize globalization, but to illustrate some important contours that may motivate us to take the democratic mission of schooling much more seriously. We should be taking the phenomenon of globalization itself much more seriously in education, at all levels, studying it, teaching about it, and considering how to best respond to it in ways that are democratic, compassionate, and socially just.

Globalization has been variously described as a phenomenon, a process, a force, a philosophy, a system, an age, and a social condition.<sup>8</sup> In a simple sense, the word globalization refers to the increased interconnection among people around the world, through the sharing of ideas, the intertwining of economic markets, and the movement of people and products. Anthony Giddens defines it as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”<sup>9</sup> We have greater cross-cultural contact throughout the world now than we ever have had, as the “cultural Other is no longer remote, exotic, or mystical and beyond our reach.”<sup>10</sup> In part this is due to the development of new communication technologies that have allowed us to quickly and easily access each other, even in some of the remotest regions of the globe. Geographic borders have in many ways become quite porous, particularly in terms of the movement of products (though this is less true in the movement of people). This is clearly evident in the foods we eat, cars we drive, clothes we wear, and toys and gadgets we play with, as they are all typically produced far from the places where we live, and in countries that many of us have never even heard of.

While there are many complex facets to globalization, its economic dimensions are perhaps the most notable and most democratically troublesome. As Thomas Friedman notes, the engine fueling globalization is “free-market capitalism — the more you let market forces rule and the more you open your economy to free trade and competition, the more efficient and flourishing your economy will be. Globalization means the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world.”<sup>11</sup> Yet despite the promise of efficient and flourishing economies, the benefits of globalization have been “unevenly distributed,” and in fact, many argue

that the “global economy has created greater social stratification and more inequality in society” than ever.<sup>12</sup> This is because, unchecked, a capitalist system elevates profit above all other motivations, including the quality of human lives. It also exacerbates competition, greed, and fear, pitting individuals (and corporations) against each other in a fight for markets, resources, and advantages. Capitalism has become globalized and corporatized; it now seems that corporations “rule the world.”<sup>13</sup> Uncontrolled and unregulated, international relations driven by free-market capitalism result in a “race to the bottom,”<sup>14</sup> where corporations do whatever it takes to produce goods and services the most inexpensively, which is invariably in locations where there is little protection for either workers or the environment. It is here where capitalist motivations rub up against democratic commitments to a common good, and where it becomes important to disentangle democratic freedom from its conflation with market freedom.

Democracy involves balancing individual rights (and concurrently corporate rights/freedoms) with a responsibility to cultivate shared goods. “Democracy,” writes James Beane, “is an idea about how people might live together. At the core are two related principles: (1) that people have a fundamental right to human dignity and (2) that people have a responsibility to care about the common good and the dignity and welfare of others.”<sup>15</sup> Yet unless we collectively and democratically impose regulations, a corporation is only responsible to its shareholders, who themselves typically only desire that their investment of money in a company yields them more money. In an unfettered capitalist system, democratic considerations such as care and concern for the welfare of fellow citizens, both near and far, are simply irrelevant. This is because “it is enhanced value for shareholders which drives and structures corporate-decision making — without regard for the social, environmental and economic consequences of those decisions.”<sup>16</sup> Yet globalization need not be defined merely by its economic dimensions. The very forces, especially technological ones, that allow the expansion of capitalism to all reaches of the planet can equally enable challenges to that expansion.

Despite his largely acritical celebration of globalization, Freidman provides some useful insights into its democratic potential through democratized access to information and to the tools necessary to participate in the global world.<sup>17</sup> For example, more and more people are gaining access to the Internet. While this can allow them to invest in lucrative (albeit potentially exploitive) industries, it can also allow them to join social justice advocacy groups seeking more humane living conditions. Kellner maintains that we actually have two globalizations occurring: an elite-controlled and imposed one from “above,” and a more democratic, grassroots one from “below.”<sup>18</sup> Globalization from above involves the top-down, homogenizing, and corporate-driven spread of capitalism. It is driven by the desire for power, profit, and control of world resources. Alternatively, globalization from below involves efforts by average local citizens to respond to such capitalist forces in systemic ways, and to fight back to preserve both their livelihoods and the belief that the institutions of society should work for all people, not just the select few with economic power. Globalization from below is manifest when “oppositional individuals

and social movements resist globalization and use its institutions and instruments to further democratization and social justice.”<sup>19</sup> It involves “global networking for a better world,” and imagining “a more humane and ecologically sane connectedness.”<sup>20</sup>

Globalization from below is led, in part, by “cyberactivists” who use the Internet to mobilize people and to develop coalitions and “networks of solidarity.”<sup>21</sup> Numerous groups with shifting and overlapping alliances are engaging in democratic forms of globalization from below, including nongovernmental, environmental, labor union, student rights, indigenous rights, civil rights, and anticorporate organizations and groups. We can see evidence of their efforts in the global protests of meetings of the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement partners. Even though globalization from below has not been heavily theorized, it holds great democratic potential worth exploring. Moreover, this vision of a grassroots, compassionate, justice-oriented globalization, aimed at humanely enriching forms of international connectivity and harmony, resonates significantly with how critical educators and philosophers characterize the heart of democracy. In fact, exploring, theorizing, and furthering globalization from below can help us to reawaken the commitments to democracy that we rhetorically express frequently, yet that are rarely enacted and practiced.

#### REVITALIZING DEMOCRACY

Arguably one of the central purposes of U.S. public schools is to teach democracy, to teach the habits and behaviors that make democratic life possible. A primary function of schools is to mold citizens who share at least some minimum democratic values necessary for living together peaceably. James Beane and Michael Apple write “that democracy is the central tenet of our social and political relations. It is, we say, the basis for how we govern ourselves, the concept by which we measure the wisdom and worth of social policies and shifts, the ethical anchor we seek when our political ship seems to drift.”<sup>22</sup> They suggest that democracy is more than just a political system; it is a way of life that involves a balance between individual rights and social responsibilities, a concern for the common good, a commitment to cooperation and problem solving, and ongoing work “to promote human dignity, equity, justice, and critical action.”<sup>23</sup> In this vision of democracy, citizens work together to address social problems, challenge inequities, provide equality of opportunity, and cultivate economic justice. Such citizens are engaged in the world around them, informed, and civically and politically active. Yet rarely is this justice-oriented, participatory vision of democratic citizenship the dominant one we cultivate and pass on in schools.

Typically when democracy is taught in schools, the focus is on procedural dimensions: how a bill becomes a law, who is eligible to hold office, how many members there are in Congress, how the voting process works. Democracy is taught as if it is a fixed, static system passed on to younger generations. For example, we teach classes in government, yet rarely engage the meaning of citizenship in an ongoing and sophisticated fashion. Is it any surprise then, that so many people conceptualize democracy in naïve, self-interested, and vulgar ways? Beane

thoughtfully distinguishes these understandings of democracy from a more responsible or noble version. He notes that a naïve conception of democracy is premised on the belief that simple participation in civic life and political processes (such as voting) is sufficient both to sustain human dignity and to protect communal goods. Private or self-interested democracy is even more limited, as it involves the narrowly individualistic conception that democracy is primarily about personal freedoms, as is echoed in the often heard phrase “this is a democracy, I can do whatever I want.” Vulgar democracy reflects a similarly limited sensibility, marked by the conflation of human freedom with the free market, and the reduction of freedom to simply having lots of consumer choices.<sup>24</sup> He argues that we should be building a richer, more robust democracy, conceptualized as a process of living and learning together in mutually enriching ways. Several important ideas form the building blocks of this democratic vision, including faith that as citizens we have the ability to care for and about each other, to see our fates as intertwined, and to work collectively “to resolve the issues we face and the social capacity to work together in doing so.”<sup>25</sup>

This more robust and noble vision of democracy resonates in the work of those who advocate for globalization from below, for ways of living together that challenge the oppressive logic of capitalism and instead support and enhance human rights, and ensure environmental protection, equal opportunity, educational access, and social justice. The positive conception of globalization includes the spread of democracy throughout the world. If this is to be the case, then we ought to be working much harder to ensure that the democratic sensibility that is being globalized is a meaningful one, not simply a thin vision of market rule. Worried about our present and future world, Apple and Beane lament that

we live in a time when the very meaning of democracy is being radically changed. Rather than referring to ways in which political and institutional life are shaped by equitable, active, widespread, and fully informed participation, democracy is increasingly being defined as unregulated business maneuvers in a free-market economy.<sup>26</sup>

Yet I am hopeful that we can awaken more humane and justice-oriented democratic sensibilities through how we teach about, and live out, democratic commitments in schools. A beginning is to better infuse a robust conception of democracy into educational practice, and to situate this vision in light of the challenges of globalization. Minimally, as part of envisioning and actualizing genuine democracy, students, as citizens in the making, should learn to be active and critical thinkers, to hold those in power accountable and responsible to common goods, and to engage in ongoing efforts to create and sustain social justice around the world.

#### A DIFFERENT VISION

One of the biggest challenges we need to overcome in how we teach about democracy — and how we teach about every subject — is that our current school systems seem to be set up so that students accumulate information, but not so they actually think deeply about or question that information or the information they are not being exposed to. While there is widespread public agreement that school reform is necessary, too many people seem to be seduced by the logic and mandates of No Child Left Behind, and thus believe what we most need are higher academic



standards and rigorous direct instruction in achieving those standards, along with frequent testing to demonstrate our progress in these efforts. Sadly, in the public discourse of schooling, little attention is given to how limited a vision of education this is, and how much a standards-driven, skill, drill, and test system actually exacerbates the very problems associated with unfettered global capitalism, including self-centered individualism, unhealthy competition, and instrumental rationality. Fundamental questions about the meaning of democracy and of global citizenship are conspicuously absent in the drive to raise test scores at all costs. In the current system, what students mostly learn is that right answers are rewarded far more than good questions, critical thought, imagination, or creativity. So too are obedience and docility, hardly habits we ought to want in our citizens in the making. Svi Shapiro laments that “far from a site that nurtures a critical spirit of thoughtful engagement with the injustices, violence, pain and wastefulness of the world we live in, school...is a place that, with rare exceptions, cultivates a willful ignorance or avoidance of our responsibility to be questioners of the status quo.”<sup>27</sup>

We can create a different vision for schooling that entails nurturing citizens who respond critically and compassionately to the challenges of globalization. This requires that we rethink educational priorities, more actively and visibly resist current mind-numbing reforms, live up to rhetorical commitments to democracy, and better identify the knowledge, habits, and skills needed to ensure that what we help to nourish and spread around the world is a compassionate globalization from below, not a corporate fueled celebration of capitalism above all else. We can draw from numerous resources to imagine and actualize this more robust democratic vision. For example, Nel Noddings identifies a number of important components of education for global citizenship, including lessons in promoting peace, eliminating poverty and injustice, caring about others, protecting the earth, and preserving diversity.<sup>28</sup> Cornel West dedicates a recent book to matters of democracy, suggesting that we must remember that “democracy is more a verb than a noun — it is more a dynamic striving and collective movement than a static order or stationary status quo.”<sup>29</sup> He argues that democracy inherently involves efforts of thoughtful and informed citizens to hold those with power accountable to public goods, not simply to private gain. Imagine how different schools might look if we truly believed that it is a central responsibility of public education to help students learn how to question those with power, and “to engage the moral and political conflicts that are central to democratic life?”<sup>30</sup> Certainly this would not involve teaching in ways that uphold a problematic status quo (or even worse, in ways that avoid addressing contemporary social and political realities altogether), but rather teaching that asks students to participate in building a world that lives up to our best democratic visions.

Ultimately, if education is going to help create a more democratic world, rather than the elite-controlled world that has arguably been in the making for the last several decades (as part of globalization from above), we will need to cultivate global citizens who have an explicit orientation toward social justice. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne distinguish between three kinds of citizens: personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented.<sup>31</sup> Personally responsible citizens uphold

good individual character, obey the law, pay taxes, and volunteer when called upon. Participatory citizens are actively engaged in their communities, organizing events, promoting civic responsibility among others, and taking leadership positions in established systems. Yet both personally responsible and participatory citizens work within existing social, economic, and political systems, rarely questioning the systems themselves or engaging in any sort of structural critique. Alternatively, justice-oriented citizens critically assess these existing systems, call explicit attention to injustice, and know about social movements and how to enact systemic change. They focus on root causes for problems, not on surface-level solutions. Westheimer and Kahne provide a useful example of these different orientations in relation to questions of hunger. Personally responsible citizens might contribute to food drives, while participatory citizens are the ones organizing those food drives. In contrast, justice-oriented citizens are also intent on exploring why people are hungry in the first place, and engage in work to change that reality.<sup>32</sup>

Justice-oriented citizens are necessary if we hope to cultivate a more compassionate, democratic vision for globalization. We need citizens who can ask critical questions of our current system and who can imagine possibilities for humane social arrangements that do not involve the increasing accumulation of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, while others suffer needlessly. As philosophers of education, it seems important that we help call attention to this justice-oriented vision of citizenship (a vision that builds upon the possibilities of globalization from below), as well as help to reawaken the commitments to critical democracy that we have argued so eloquently for over the last century. We have many tools and resources at our disposal. It seems what we most need now is to summon the will and political commitment (and help others to do so as well) needed to make education for engaged, responsible, compassionate, justice-oriented, global citizenship a reality. Critically exploring globalization may add a newfound sense of urgency to this goal, helping to awaken the passion and motivation needed to develop and sustain this commitment.

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