

**"Openness" to/for what?**  
***Democratic citizenship education and the broadening of spaces where  
conflict can be understood and dealt with more responsibly***

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In this paper, I address the question of the role of democracy/ open societies in fostering a more equitable and peaceful world -- or, the question whether democracy and open societies can contribute to diminishing the global divides, and how so; and I do so, from an educational perspective. From the outset, it is important that I explain two ways in which an educational approach to these issues is relevant. First, I proceed on the assumption that education can -- and ought to -- be an important "ally" in the democratization of our societies (Bai, Dewey, 1966; 1999, Rorty, 1989, 1993). Indeed, democratic citizenship education and its "sisters" (human rights education, peace education, conflict resolution education, anti-discriminatory/anti-racist education, among others) are important means by which democracies/open societies can foster a more equitable and peaceful world. Second, education *is* already social, ethical, and political in that it *already* transmits certain values, knowledge, views of the world and of others, as well as it reproduces, or challenges, certain structures and dynamics that we find in the social-political spheres (Freire; Greene, 1996). Thus, as I see it, it is important to *remind* our selves that there are several political themes, problems and concerns that are very much relevant to education, and vice versa. One of such themes, for example, is the theme of recognition, that I connect with the strengthening of democratic citizenship.<sup>1</sup> To

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Bickford, 1996; Fraser 1997; Taylor, 1994; Tubino, 2000; Young, 1996, 1997.

begin with then, I think it is important that we bring these issues to inform one another (education and politics) and to allow for more interaction between these “different” or “separate” spheres.

My main argument is that, in terms of the interconnection between democracy, education, and conflict -- which includes, but is not necessarily equal to war<sup>2</sup>--, the main challenge is to create, broaden, and maintain open, spaces (educative spaces, in the broadest sense) in which to develop a deeper understanding of conflict and much more *responsible* ways of handling/dealing with it. But, what to understand by democracy? What to understand by openness, or openness to/for *what*? What are *responsible* ways of handling conflict?

This discussion, and some suggestions for responding to these questions, are based upon a certain conception of democracy and also, upon a certain view of education. I specifically highlight and explore three relevant aspects that these conceptions have for our discussion: openness, their ethical/moral character, and their intersubjective nature. I also draw a further connection between these three aspects and the need for recognition as a primary good or basic human need to be taken into account in a just democratic society, and therefore, in democratic citizenship education.

Finally, I stress the idea that no authentic democratic citizenship education project is viable if it does not acknowledge -- from the outset -- *how*, or in what ways democracy is *not*/has *not* been “realized.” In other words, I call attention to the need to begin by actually *identifying* or *naming* the inequities, conflicts, divides, that democracies and

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<sup>2</sup> In my view, conflict is intrinsic to democracy and to difference, diversity, plurality. The issue is not so much to be concerned with the elimination, or final “resolutions” of conflicts themselves -- because this would mean that we need to “get rid” of differences and of “otherness,” but to learn how to deal and respond to those differences in non violent ways, and in more transformative and constructive ways.

democratic education intend to transform/overcome/transcend or redress. Paraphrasing Aristotle, we need to *know* the “knot” in order to untangle it:

For those who wish to get rid of perplexities it is a good plan to get into them thoroughly; for subsequent certainty is a release from the previous perplexities, and release is impossible when we do not know the knot (Aristotle, Met.B, 995a)

I now turn to describe briefly the political-philosophical framework that I use in this paper, which will also help begin to respond to the questions I have posed above. I have drawn upon Habermas’ work on democracy (1984, 1994, 1998, 1999) because I think he emphasizes both the “open” character of democratic societies (which is the general theme that we are discussing here), as well as the communicative/intersubjective character of authentic democratic citizenship. To begin with, radical/emancipatory democracy is a political and ethical project: one that strives for the self-realization or fulfillment of the needs of all. According to Habermas, the democratic project is the historical project – an *unfinished* project -- to give *all* citizens equal rights so that *all* have equal possibilities of self-realization. In Habermas's words, *autonomy and self-realization are the key concepts for a practice with an immanent purpose, namely, the production and reproduction of a life worthy of human beings* (1998, p.469). Now, with regards to needs, I follow John Rawls’s list of basic or primary social needs or goods (Rawls, 1999, p.79). These include rights, liberties and opportunities, income, employment, and wealth, as well as self-respect/self-esteem (sense of one’s own worth). I am interested in the latter, which I complement with the need for recognition.

In this paper I focus on the primary good or basic human need for recognition. As Charles Taylor argues,

Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it [...] the projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized. Not only contemporary feminism but also race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the premise that the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression [...](1994, p.36)

non recognition or mis recognition [...] can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being. [...] Beyond simple lack of respect, it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy but a vital human need. (1994, p..25-26)

In choosing to focus on this need for recognition, I am also indirectly suggesting that, underlying conflicts (and wars) we often find that there is a strong need for recognition that has not been attended to. Moreover, very specific material, political, social, cultural, or territorial claims and demands, could also be understood as expressing, or being instances of, demands *for* recognition that happen to take *those* specific forms.

Coming back to Habermas, the emancipatory/democratic project conceives of the *political* (and ethical) practice as cooperative and intersubjective (communicative action). This is intimately connected to the theme of recognition as a vital human need that a democratic society needs to respond to, in that recognition is something that implies intersubjective interaction. As Charles Taylor argues -- the sense of self respect and esteem for our identities is something that we develop in *dialogical*, rather than in monological processes and relations. That is, the image or perception that 'others' have of us, affect and influence how we perceive ourselves; and thus, the ways in which we are or are not recognized by others, have an impact on our identities.

As a Peruvian/Latin American, I am very aware and know about the long lasting effects of a lack of recognition, and the diminishing perception of our indigenous cultures and population, projected by the Spanish colonizers since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, I

want to suggest that that both the unjust/oppressive structures as well as this internalized oppression, have made it very difficult for these (my) people to become engaged and participate fully and actively in processes of political opinion and will formation and of decision making. In other words, non recognition, together with the social structures and dynamics based upon it, have weakened citizenship.

Thus, I want to argue that in an authentic democracy, responsible citizenship would imply or require the willingness and ability to *respond to* the “others,” in ways that do not “inflict” them damage, in ways that express recognition of their value as human beings and the value of their life projects. The ways in which we respond to the others are also based on *how* we recognize -- or mis recognize/ not recognize, those others with whom we interact, as well as their needs or claims.

With regards to openness, *ideally*, democracy means that there is always room for, that there is openness to, and the possibility of, engaging in hermeneutic dialogue, whereby there is an exchange of different perspectives, values and world views. Dialogue is more than an interchange or exchange of information and experiences; it is a human encounter. The purpose/aim/motivation for this kind of exchange and encounter is not necessarily (or primarily) to achieve consensus or agreement though (as Habermas contends) but rather, the purpose is to broaden our perspectives and to auto- recreate/re-invent our identities (Tubino, 2002, p.10). Intercultural dialogue is an end in itself in that it enables intersubjective recognition.

Democracy, from this angle, is the space and place where we can express and exchange our thoughts, concerns, feelings, and alternatives, with regards, especially, to the issues that are very important in/for our lives. Democracy means enough openness to

enable our own transformation and change triggered by our encounters and by our dialogue with others, as well as the possibility to then go further and initiate transformation and change as responsible citizens at the social/political level, i.e., as citizens that *respond to* one another on the basis of an *a posteriori* recognition, since, as Fidel Tubino argues, to “value” the other before (*a priori*) our real encounter with her is a false form of recognition. Human beings deserve and long for/desire recognition, not condescension. True recognition occurs *a posteriori*, in the experience of our encounters with the other (Tubino).

Although Habermas’s emphasis on “reaching understanding” and agreement is in my view problematic (Bickford; Young, 1996, 1997) and although I am arguing here for an understanding of communication and dialogue that transcends the purpose of tolerance, consensus or *a priori* recognition, I still find Habermas’s approach useful in that it reminds us of the intersubjective and cooperative (solidary) character of communication and of communicative action -- in the light of an emancipatory project.

Habermas is also concerned with the shrinking of spaces where dissent, critical reflection, dialogue, about crucial issues that concern us, can take place (What he refers to as the processes of unbalanced rationalization or colonization of the life-world).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the opposite of openness is dogmatism in its various forms. For example, rigidity and stubbornness, with regards to our own positions and identities, as well as arrogant attitudes that *mis*-recognize or not recognize the other, are all forms of

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<sup>3</sup> “We must at least regard it as an empirical question, whether the tensions among ever more rationalized spheres of life go back in fact to an incompatibility of abstract standards of value and aspects of validity, or rather to a partial and therefore *unbalanced rationalization* – for example, to the fact that the capitalist economy and modern administration expand at the expense of other domains of life that are structurally disposed to moral-practical and expressive forms of rationality and squeeze them into forms of economic or administrative rationality.” (Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol.1: Reason and the Rationalization of society*. Boston: Beacon, 1984. p.183)

dogmatism that often times express themselves in unjust and cruel treatment towards the other. Dogmatism is what closes or narrows the “room” where real transformation, possibilities, and alternatives (for ourselves as individuals, and as members of different groups, and communities) can emerge. Often times, it is precisely the systematic lack of spaces in which to conceive and discuss “alternatives,” what causes stagnation, frustration, decay, and may eventually engender violence.

In other words, and as a more direct response to our question of “openness to/for what?” democracy means open spaces where *reformulation*, *reinvention*, questioning, proposing anew or differently, are possible. In some instances then, democracy means the possibility or open spaces to dissent (to *say* different, to *be* different), to say “no” to the prevailing or current dominant/hegemonic discourses, narratives, status quo (because these narratives, discourses or status quo do not do justice/or do not fulfill our needs or impede the realization of our life projects). Thus democracy also means the potential for transforming/changing current dynamics, practices, attitudes and structures in place-- not arbitrarily or for the sake of “contesting” them; but precisely because we think that something/s are not working *for us*, for our well being or for the fulfillment of our most basic needs (Galtung 1994).

From an educational perspective, these ideas support the argument, that an important aspect of democratic education is that it should foster and maintain open spaces where critical reflection is practiced and where young people experience engagement and agency in their school life and learning (Smith et. al. 1998; Freire, 1973, 1999). Paulo Freire, in his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” uses the concept of *conscientizacao* (conscientization) to refer to the process of learning to perceive and recognize one’s own

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situation (specifically, it is the process whereby the oppressed become aware of their situation) and how to act upon it.<sup>4</sup> Conscientization requires an educational approach and method that poses problems and questions, and leads to the recognition of one's situation as a problem (problems challenge us to "solve" them, to look for alternatives or solutions). We require understanding, creativity and imagination to transform any problematic historical reality.<sup>5</sup> For Freire, critical thinking cannot be a skill detached from practice. It directs our understanding to praxis, it prepares us to *intervene* in, or to act upon, the specific situations that it renders problematic.

Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the here and now, which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation – which determines their perception of it – can they begin to move (1999, p.66)

Again, with regards to this theme, there are many issues that we could discuss here, but I will only highlight the importance of open spaces where history, for example, can be narrated *differently*, where stories and narratives can be told differently and re-invented/re-created in the light of/or, given current concerns, problems, questions, conflicts (Gutierrez, 1993; Greene, 1996)

Therefore, there needs to be spaces where conflict, as well as current controversial issues can be "opened" up for better understanding, for discussion from a diversity of perspectives. And here I come back to the theme of recognition, identity, and self esteem. The ways in which we narrate our histories and those of "others," as well as the ways in which we portray, describe, discuss conflict, controversial issues (September 11 for example), have significant impact on our different identities, on our views of the world

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<sup>4</sup> See Freire: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 1999. p. 90, 94-95. Here Freire makes more detailed distinctions between the different "stages" of awareness from being *submerged* in a situation to *emerging* from it, from becoming conscious to consciously getting to *intervene*.

and our views/understanding of “others.” In turn, our own sense of ourselves determines our agency as individuals and as members of a community/or different communities.

My views on democratic citizenship education, and on the importance of re-telling our history/histories in ways that we get to understand “the knot” better, are very much influenced by my own “location” and identity as a person that grew up in Perú, where there is a long history of non-recognition, injustice and abuse, where -- in my view -- there has been no democracy. The case of Perú is also relevant to our discussion in this seminar, because this country happens to be in a transitional period towards democracy, after more than 10 years of a very controversial, authoritarian regime, and of internal conflict and war (terrorism: The Shining Path, MRTA, and state terrorism).

Within this context, there are positive/hopeful signs that Peruvians are willing to face difficult/hard episodes of our recent history. We have begun a process of Truth Commission hearings on human rights violations in the form of disappearances, massacres, torture, and unfair trials, committed during the 80’s and 90’s in the name of “anti-subversive/anti-terrorist war.” Sadly, it is no coincidence that the vast majority of the victims pertain to the poorer and more indigenous communities in our country, precisely those who have been not/mis recognized for centuries and who, in reality, have not been treated as citizens, nor have they exercised their rights as citizens.

To me, this process of the truth commissions hearings are also a very important educative process, an important democratic educational initiative, because it implicitly expresses the intention -- for the first time -- to *listen to* (and at least in that way, to “encounter”) those who have been denied a voice and recognition for so many years. It also expresses the intention to recognize these people as citizens whose most basic rights

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.66.

were violated and who today are granted a space to give their testimonies. To me, the value and potential/possibilities of such political-moral-educative process, is that it contributes to the strengthening of citizenship in that it allows for some kind of recognition to begin to take place. This recognition, in turn, contributes to a stronger sense of one self/one's self-respect/self-esteem, which ultimately is the basis for any personal and social endeavor.

The strong "hunch" or intuition that I have tried to explain and make an argument for, in this paper, is that an important way in which democracies and open societies can contribute to overcome the causes of conflict, of injustice, of suffering, is to maintain and broaden the spaces in our societies where we can confront or face these issues. Educative spaces are not limited to schools or "formal" educational settings. Having said this, however, schools are important places where these open spaces should also exist. At both levels (school, education, and at the more broader social political level) it would be contradictory to real openness, to hold on, or to expect too much that a certain/specific "outcome," will be the "result" or "solution" of allowing for these spaces to exist. I think it is dangerous and counterproductive to expect or believe that democracy is supposed to resolve it all, or that there is supposed to be no conflicts in a democracy. Difference, diversity, plurality, as well as conflict, are all part of life and of democracy. Perhaps the most valuable contributions of democracy do not come from what it "resolves," but from its commitment to be open to keep looking at the ways precisely in which democracy, social justice, and peace, have not or are not being realized. Because it is only through this sort of constructive self-criticism that -- just like at a personal level -- democracy can

“improve,” and thus contribute by offering the conditions that allow for the  
“improvement” of our lives, and those of others.

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