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POPULISM, LEGITIMACY, AND STATE-SPONSORED SCHOOLING

Populismo, legitimidad y educación financiada por el Estado

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore a selection of current scholarship on educational populist movements in Brazil, the U.S., and Israel. After a brief examination of these populist forms, which reveal political trends of ethno-nationalism, religious orthodoxy, anti-secularism, and authoritarianism, I examine democratic theory to understand populism from a dual democratic theoretical positions: pragmatism, and radical or critical democratic theory. I use pragmatist insights into the public sphere (Dewey, 1927; Frega, 2010, 2019), to explain how and why publics emerge in the dynamic of democratic state institutions of schooling. I then turn to radical democratic theory to

explain the idea of populist expression and its role in democratic politics (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). In pragmatist terms, populist movements are potential publics, relying on an experimentalist idea of political life which includes group associations in civil society which generate feedback, action, and dissent in attempts to shape decisions in state institutions. Yet too many populist movements fail to become democratic publics insofar as they are characterized by narrowed, private interests, unreflective habits, and practices which are antagonistic to inquiry, responsiveness, and deliberation. As such, populist movements threaten the normative legitimacy and stability of liberal democratic state institutions of schooling. While minimalist, or thin versions of populism are compatible with, and important vehicles for educational politics, the presently dominating maximalist versions profiled in this article threaten the liberal-democratic state project (Sant, 2021). Pragmatist theories of democratic politics and publics (Frega, 2019) offer ways to meet the populist moment, but contain significant implications of institutional re-design and reform for their realization.

Keywords: democracy; pragmatism; radical democracy; populism; deliberation.

RESUMEN

En este artículo, analizo una muestra de las prácticas educativas actuales en los movimientos populistas educativos de Brasil, Estados Unidos e Israel. Tras un breve examen de estas formas de populismo, que revela tendencias políticas de nacionalismo étnico, ortodoxia religiosa, antiseccularismo y autoritarismo, reviso la teoría democrática para interpretar el populismo desde una posición teórica democrática dual: pragmatismo, y teoría democrática crítica o radical. Utilizo reflexiones pragmáticas en la esfera pública (Dewey, 1927; Frega, 2010, 2019), para explicar cómo y por qué emergen colectivos en la dinámica de las instituciones estatales democráticas de educación. Y posteriormente, paso a la teoría democrática radical para analizar la idea de la expresión populista y su función en la política democrática (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). En términos pragmáticos, los movimientos populistas son colectivos en potencia, basados en una idea experimentalista de la vida política que incluye asociaciones de grupos en la sociedad civil que generan opinión, acción y desacuerdo en intentos de conformar decisiones en las instituciones estatales. Pero muchos movimientos populistas no llegan a ser colectivos democráticos en la medida en que se caracterizan por reducidos intereses privados, hábitos irreflexivos y prácticas que son antagónicas a la interpelación, la capacidad de respuesta y la deliberación. Como tales, los movimientos populistas amenazan la legitimidad normativa y la estabilidad de las instituciones estatales democráticas liberales de enseñanza. Aunque las versiones minimalistas o menos militantes de populismo son compatibles con, y vehículos importantes para la política educativa, las versiones maximalistas actualmente dominantes perfiladas en este artículo amenazan el proyecto de estado liberal-democrático (Sant, 2021). Las teorías pragmáticas de política democrática y acciones colectivas (Frega, 2019) ofrecen vías para conocer el momento populista, pero contienen significativas implicaciones de rediseño y reforma institucional para su materialización.

Palabras clave: democracia; pragmatismo; democracia radical; populismo; deliberación.

“It was not ‘Let’s have a dialogue.’ It was ‘Here are our demands.’”
(Williams 2022, p. 54)

1. INTRODUCTION

A school board official, elected to serve on the local governing body for a U.S. school district in the state of Tennessee, offered observations about dialogue versus demands in a 2022 interview, describing his board’s interactions with populist groups like Moms for Liberty. Representatives of the group had been attending board meetings regularly with complaints regarding a curriculum which included books depicting painful struggles of African Americans during the U.S. Civil Rights movement (Williams 2022). Groups like Moms for Liberty have emerged as powerful forces in U.S. educational politics. Populism is characterized by the political expressions of contestation and demand between “the people” and those governing them, viewed as elites in the populist framing (Laclau, 2005). Populism happens when the people come to life as a form of expressed agency or articulation.

Recent decades have witnessed a surge of populism around the world. State-supported education systems have been among the institutions which are populist targets, in countries like the United States, Chile, Brazil, Turkey, and Israel. Drawing from the emerging research on populism in educational politics and policy, I explore populism’s value to state-sponsored schools: what are the alleged democratic benefits, and costs, of populist expression for education in liberal democracies? While populist forms of contestation have an important role in the public sphere of educational governance, at present, many populist movements bring the erosion of fundamental liberal democratic norms. While forms of populist expression are necessary to democratic evolution and reform, part of the “interventionist spirit” of democracy itself (Rogers, 2010, p. 5), populism also contains the seeds of democratic destruction insofar as it diminishes deliberative possibilities, and the requisite responsiveness to pluralism, which are essential for the legitimacy and stability of liberal democratic institutions.

In this article, I explore a segment of the existing scholarship on educational populist movements in Brazil, the U.S., and Israel¹. After a brief examination of these populist forms, which reveal political trends of ethno-nationalism, religious orthodoxy, anti-secularism, and authoritarianism, I examine democratic theory to understand populism from a dual philosophical perspective. I use pragmatist philosophical insights into the public sphere (Dewey, 1927; Frega, 2010, 2019), to

1. These three countries of focus were chosen based on three criteria: 1) existing published scholarship drawing on contemporary, empirically-informed studies of populist movements’ influence on school practices, curriculum, or politics in a country; 2) published in the last five years; and drawing from 3) a range of democratic countries from around the world that boast significant cultural and ideological pluralism.

explain how and why publics emerge in the dynamic of democratic state institutions of schooling. I then turn to radical democratic theory to explore the idea of populist expression and its role in democratic politics (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018). In pragmatist terms, populist movements are potential publics, relying on an experimentalist idea of political life which includes group associations in civil society which generate feedback, action, and dissent in attempts to shape decisions in state institutions. Yet too many populist movements fail to become democratic publics insofar, as they are characterized by narrowed, privatized interests, unreflective habits, and practices which are antagonistic to inquiry, responsiveness, and deliberation. As such, populist movements can threaten the normative legitimacy and stability of liberal democratic state institutions of schooling. While minimalist, or thin versions of populism are compatible with, and important vehicles for educational politics, the presently dominating maximalist versions profiled in this article threaten the liberal-democratic state project of public, inclusive forms of education (Sant, 2021).

2. POPULISMS IN GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE: THE CASES OF BRAZIL, UNITED STATES, AND ISRAEL

The word populism has roots in ancient Rome, from the Latin *populi*, “to simultaneously refer to the sovereign people and the ‘common people’” (Sant 2021, p. 39). Histories of populism in politics date more recent history to the 19th century in Russia and the U.S. In the 1860s and ‘70s, Russian urban youths known as *narodniki* attempted to energize peasants towards overthrowing the Tzar (Sant, 2021, p. 39). In 1891, at a convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, a coalition of farmers and industrial laborers brought together by mutual economic struggle, formed the “People’s Party.” These self-declared Populists were both the product of, and catalysts for a social movement of workers, dedicated to returning power to the people. These Populists characterized “the people” as everyday workers: farmers, industrial laborers, immigrants and native-born, Black and White, men and women, Christians and Jews, whose shared struggle for economic survival united them against a common adversary: plutocrats, the economic elite (Frank 2020). To be a Populist, then, was to be united as “the people” against “the elite.” Boyte (2012) argues that “populist movements are narrative. They grow from the sense that an elite is endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted people, its memories, origins, and ways of life” (p. 300).

By various scholars, populism is defined as a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004), a discourse (Laclau, 2005), and a cultural phenomenon (Mazzarella, 2019). Populist expression has historical roots around the globe, and today, comes from political organizing on both the political left and the political right. Sant (2021) describes populist leaders on nearly all continents, from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist considered Asia’s most prominent populist leader, to the Australian

One Nation Party, opposing Asian immigration and multiculturalism, to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. While much of the documented populist expression around the globe is right-wing and authoritarian in nature, there are many examples of left populism which organizes for, among other issues, human and civil rights. A key distinction in populist types, which I will employ here, is between “maximal versus minimalist” definitions of populist politics (Sant 2021). A maximalist definition is favored by media portrayals and features authoritarian leaders, nationalist goals, and fundamental challenges to democratic institutions, laws, and customs. The maximalist definition is clearly evident in the prominent contemporary literature on educational populism, as I describe here. Yet Sant argues that confusing populism itself with the ideological baggage it can often carry, helps feed the demonization of populist expression in the media and mainstream discourses rather than enabling close, careful interpretation. Thus, for Sant (2021), populism is a “thin term referring to political practices that polarise society into two distinct groups, the elite and the people, where the people underpin the ultimate source of the general will” (p. 52). Sant’s minimal or thin definition — echoing Mudde’s (2004) influential analysis of the concept — provides a useful foundation for the present inquiry, allowing for a diverse array of practices and positions which might constitute a particular educational populist movement.

Globally, populist movements have been actively influencing educational politics and policy for decades. I sketch a limited portrait of this scholarship, drawing from a selective examination of contemporary research from Brazil, the United States, and Israel. The broader philosophical scholarship on populism in education shows the rich diversity of populist expressions and movements that are contextually unique to the cultural-political dynamics of their national origins (Sant, 2021; Sullivan, 2019). Yet emerging out of recent empirical studies is a portrait of educational populism characterized by values of ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and religious orthodoxy, uniquely conjoined and expressed in a myriad of cultural forms. A pattern, too, seen in this emerging literature is the sense of “backlash” against liberal democratic values in state institutions of education, wherein attempts to make schools more inclusive of and representative of the rich multicultural pluralism of nations is met with populist forms of resistance by citizen groups and the populist elected officials representing them.

Brazil presents a case study of these global patterns and trends. Emerging as a democratic state in the 1980s, Brazil’s education sector “experienced a social-democratic turn in social policies. ... The ‘right to education’ included child development, social justice, the exercise of citizenship and work qualification” (Alvesa, Segattob, & Pinedaa, 2021, p. 332). By the 2000’s, education policy was reflective of inclusion and diversity values, “with an emphasis on racial equity, [and] equal treatment of students based on gender and LGBTQ recognition” (Ibid.). Ethno-national and religious conservative backlash was powerfully organized, in response. Alvesa, Segttob and Pinedaa (2021) document how the No Partisan School (NPSM) movement,

organized in 2004, quickly developed to organize against what was perceived to be a movement towards leftist political, ideological and religious censorship. NPSM ultimately joined forces with a Christian Pentacostal group, Evangelical Parliamentary Front (EPF), to become a united, politically powerful ally to populist president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. This populist coalition of ethno-national and Christian evangelism sought “to move education policy away from a feminist, Marxist and Freirean praxis.” While “predicated on the framework of education as ‘non-partisan’ or ‘neutral’, the identification of opposing ideologies as the ‘enemy’ automatically creates a binary social division of ‘us’ against ‘them’ and ‘deservers’ versus ‘non-deservers’ (Hussain, & Yudas, 2021, p. 257). The coalition of NPSM and EPF has produced a number of bills shaped by conservative and Christian fundamentalist values which target schools, teaching practices, or initiatives perceived as the ‘enemy.’ Emblematic of these is the pushback against anti-homophobic materials in schools, mandated by newly elected President Dilma Rousseff.

NPSM and the EPF reacted, dubbing this material a ‘gay kit’, and campaigned against its distribution. The enormous pressure of these groups lobbied the National Congress-led Rousseff’s government to make a U-turn and vet the circulation of this educative material (Alvesa et al., 2021, p. 348).

The NPSM and EPF coalition has also produced a number of reactionary attempts to target Paulo Freire’s influence in school curriculum and among teachers. Condemned as Marxist, news reports documented the intimidation of teachers by “extrajudicial notifications to curb the supposed ideological indoctrination, including the pedagogical treatment of issues related to gender and sexuality” (Ibid., p. 345). While Bolsonaro’s second presidential bid has been narrowly defeated in 2022, the power of these populist coalitions will remain.

Brazil’s case has important parallels with that of the contemporary political scene in the United States. The present era of U.S. populist educational politics came from intersecting crises. The first of these was the COVID-era backlash against mandated masking and school closures. The second was the political upheaval and demands for racial justice arising from the murder of an unarmed, African American man named George Floyd in the summer of 2020, by a Minneapolis police officer, captured on video. A reactionary resistance to the racial justice efforts in education and public policy emerging out of the Floyd murder, were led by none other than President Donald Trump, a right-wing populist whose rhetoric helped embolden conservative resistance to equity initiatives in education. Conservative pundits have charged that the legal scholarship of critical race theorists is being taught in K-12 public schools, alleged without evidence to have strongly influenced the curriculum and professional development. At the present writing, 43 of the 50 U.S. states have introduced bills or taken other steps to limit how teachers can discuss racism or sexism in classrooms (Schwartz, 2021). In some states like Florida, Oklahoma,

and Arizona, conservative governors have introduced aggressive legislation which penalizes forms of education related to equity and inclusion of racial minorities, and GLBTQ students and families. The state of Florida first popularized a version of these bills, dubbed by critics as the “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, which curbs discussion of gender identity and sexuality topics among elementary schools in that state (Diaz, 2022). These populist efforts are, furthermore, often backed with authoritarianism, asserted by populist political leaders who establish control through overt threat of punishment for non-compliance. Non-compliance punishments range from withholding of state funding from the district, a down-grading of report-card or state evaluation rating, removing the professional license of the guilty party, or allowing civil lawsuits against districts or individual teachers, as is the case in Oklahoma, Florida, Missouri, Arizona, and others (Bayless, 2022). These populist expressions are also motivated by nationalist exceptionalism. Prohibitions against so-called “divisive concepts” forbid critical teaching about the history of the U.S. because it will damage or attack the alleged truth of America as a beacon of democratic hope and promise. Finally, these populist movements are increasingly articulated as “parental rights,” with groups like Moms for Liberty leading the way in pushing school boards across the country to ban books in school and public libraries addressing themes of racial equity and GLBTQ topics (Bailey, 2022).

Looking eastward from North and South America, we see similar patterns in Israeli education policy and politics, where populist governing coalitions using curriculum and textbook revisions as opportunities to infuse “a religious-ethno-nationalist” approach to school materials (Silberberga, & Agbaria, 2021, p. 326). *The Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People*, passed in 2018 (Knesset, 2018) is an example of Israeli populist politics of the religious-ethno-national variety. It is, according to its critics,

based on a transcendent set of ideals that gives populist politics and ethno-national identities a seal of sanctity and inevitability. . . an all-explaining ideology that imbues national identities with zeal, absolutism, and historical justifications in the name of an imagined collectivity that is often conceived as superior, sacred, pure, and with a longstanding historic mission (Agbaria, 2018, p. 23, in Silberberga, & Agbaria, 2021, p. 319).

Silberberg and Agbaria (2021) point to the 2016 revision of the national civics textbook, *Being citizens in Israel*, as a prominent example of how these populist-fueled ideologies have infused schooling. The new content of the text is more religious, and less pluralist. These authors also reveal that the revision process itself was criticized for its lack of transparency and exclusion of Israeli Palestinian educators from the revision process; several members of the revision committee also resigned over content disputes (Silberberg, & Agbaria, 2021, p. 321). Silberberg and Agbaria further note that “the emphasis on religious ideals

in populist politics of education can be seen as a strategic move towards enclosing the national identity of the Jewish majority within what are purely religious boundaries” (p. 326). As with the case of Brazil, we see a religious conservatism evoked to resist the secular state which is influencing curriculum and instruction in state-sponsored schooling.

These three countries show a pattern of populism emerging in recent literature: educational populism is characterized in many places by ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, and religious conservatism and orthodoxy. It constitutes a type of public backlash against the growing strength of liberal democratic state educational reforms emphasizing equity, inclusion, and pluralism in each society. Brubaker (2017) notes three elements of populism that are also relevant to this array of countries: protectionism, anti-institutionalism, and majoritarianism. “Protectionism entails a claim to protect the people against threats from above and from below. . . . Anti-institutionalism reflects the distrust of and efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the mediating functions of institutions, especially political parties, media and the courts” (Silberberg, & Agbaria, 2021, p. 327). Majoritarianism asserts the will, interests, and rights of the majority against minorities. Majoritarian claims “challenge efforts to promote the interests, protect the rights, or recognize the dignity of marginal groups, defined by religion, race or ethnicity, immigration status, sexuality, or gender. . . . seeing these as disadvantaging or symbolically devaluing those in the mainstream” (Brubaker, 2017, p. 365).

Populist politics in education have, through the history of public education, helped to make schools more inclusive and pluralist in orientation; the U.S. Civil Rights movement, referenced earlier, is an example of groups and coalitions used the public sphere — demonstrations, political actions, and persistent forms of demand — to enlarge liberal democracy’s promise of inclusivity and equality for African-Americans, students with disabilities, and women and girls. Today, educational research reveals conservative, religious, and nationalist-informed forms of populism to be flourishing. Populism is a species of associational democracy, but one which has a distinct purpose and set of goals and habits. To analyze the costs and benefits of populist movements to educational institutions, we must illuminate the critical role of group associations in democratic politics and governance, using pragmatist philosophers of democracy (Dewey, 1927; Frega, 2010, 2019). In the face of the empirical evidence discussed here, representing the impacts of contemporary populist politics in three different nation-states, the idea of populism as a democracy-enhancing element of democratic politics requires further exploration.

3. DEMOCRATIC PUBLICS AND POPULIST POLITICS

A key project of democratic theorists in the last half century has been that of “enlarging democracy,” theoretically challenging the static and statist notions of democracy as “formal political institutions in service to protect liberal values” (Frega, 2019, p. 31). Given that state-sponsored schools could not fully meet the promises of liberal-democracy in its schooling systems, plagued by class-, race-, and gender-based exclusions, these challenges were important for educational institutional development. A prominent constellation of theories in this project are those offered by philosophical pragmatists, seeking to understand the role of civil society in democratic politics. Jürgen Habermas’ theories of communicative rationality and the role of deliberative democracy loom large here, as do John Dewey’s theory of the public (Habermas, 1996; Dewey, 1927; Frega, 2019, p. 40). A parallel set of powerful theoretical expansions has been contributed by critical theorists in their conceptualization of radical democracy, using agonist strategies of contestation to push formal political institutions and processes beyond present exclusionary and oppressive dimensions, through contestation and movement-building (Laclau, & Mouffe, 1985). Populism draws from both of these theoretical traditions.

Democracy, for pragmatists, is a social, political, and educational theory, expansive far beyond the parameters of traditional, state-centered political theories. Inclusive in pragmatism’s political scope are the myriad of social groups and forms that shape our social lives, intersubjective relations, and encounters across difference. Frega (2019) describes civil society theory’s relationship to the formal democratic procedures and institutions of representative democracy. Civil society theories

underline the directly democratic function of a subset of informal associations and organizations which play a directly political role in society, such as social movements, political parties, media, and NGOs. These theories shed light on the democratic function played by this specific category of collective actor in processes of opinion- and will-formation, as well as in strategies of control, resistance, and counter-power. (p. 41)

Civil society theories of democratic politics have, for educational institutions, been particularly fitting, as educational institutions provide a particularly localized and informal space of association, and value, for families, children, and youth. Even in centralized systems of public education, schools belong to both the civil society sector and to the more formalized state or government sectors. Schools are the sites of multiple associational interaction, gathering communities, families, voluntary organizations, and political organizing work into their orbits.

Democratic theories of civil society in the pragmatist tradition center notions of the public sphere, and multiple publics, as associations of meaning and power

to define mutual interests around shared problems. As Frega (2019) notes, “The priority of publics as the main political subject implies a situated approach to normative theory, ... taking as the starting point of political analysis the concrete social processes of group-making rather than existing institutions or established political principles” (p. 186). The richly pluralistic and social terrain of schools makes public sphere theories a useful tool for analyzing educational politics. Associations of citizens, members of the larger Public of the nation-state, periodically come into existence in localities or regions to give voice and influence to affairs related to their schools, educational issues, or challenges experienced by students. These small-p publics are associations activated by shared problems or concerns among families or other educational stakeholders (Knight Abowitz, 2014). In the public sphere, these associations help citizens gain voice and power to express their interests and agendas as they might be distinct from, or oppositional to, the policies of their schools. Educational publics can exert pressure in order to break the habitual behavior generated from the bureaucratic, centrally-controlled school systems with their formal political representative structures (Waks, 2010). As Rogers (2009) notes, publics can often serve a

directive and supportive relationship to the state and its representative and administrative institutions. But insofar as the state is resistant to transformation because of ossification, the public then functions in a more oppositional role that builds its power external to the state (p. 225).

Democracy must be continually re-invented as society and political conditions evolve (Dewey, 1927; Rogers, 2009). Pragmatism’s associational, intersubjective, and praxis-oriented political frames (Rogers, 2009) overlap with those of radical democratic theorist’s accounts of democratic politics. Articulated using critical theory, the democratic enlargement process of agonist political theorists explores populism as a special type of agonist strategy, employing the logic of the democratic public sphere and civil society, but towards emancipatory ends. Mouffe (2000) offers the distinction between “politics” and “the political” as a position explaining the overlaps and distinctions with pragmatist democratic theories, with an emphasis on deep pluralism and its requisite elements of conflict:

By ‘the political’, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. ‘Politics’, on the other hand, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political.’ (p. 15)

Mouffe aims not towards unity as defining the democratic project, as this goal is impossible; democracy always leaves a remainder, an excluded group or set of subjectivities. Democracy has an us/them distinction built into its very design, in

this view. Democratic politics, then, in the radical traditions, attempts to build the assumptions of a deep pluralism, and thus antagonism, into the model.

Envisaged from the point of view of ‘agonistic pluralism’, the aim of democratic politics is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an ‘adversary’, i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15).

Populism directly takes up themes of agonist democracy as articulated by radical democratic theorists (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018).

Pragmatism complements radical theories of democracy insofar as both orientations see civil society as a rich sphere for politics, where collective social agents can emerge in response to the “unfixed, partially indeterminate” social context (Zamora, & Santarelli, 2021, p. 496). Both theoretical traditions see democratic state institutions as becoming static and enclosed by bureaucracies that exclude minoritized interests and identities. Both traditions, too, use habits of group association and action to help push state institutions towards expansive reconstruction. “Emancipatory social movements have been interpreted as Deweyan publics, insofar as they mobilize to overcome circumstances of subjection and domination, and/or their actions can be seen to contribute to improving the conditions of social life of the larger polity” (Frega, 2019, p. 198). Current populist movements influencing education in Brazil, the U.S., and Israel are not emancipatory; they are informed by anti-liberal values, defined by private interests not shared by the general public, possessing of unreflective habits, and engage in practices antagonistic to inquiry and deliberation. As a result, present populist politics, with their maximalist understandings of “the people” in authoritarian, religious, and ethno-nationalist terms, cannot lead to democratic enlargements (Frega, 2019). Instead, these movements show the problems of legitimacy and stability that maximalist populisms bring to liberal democratic institutions of schooling. To respond to populist challenges, state institutions governing education require improved conditions and design for democratic politics. These conditions are ones which must foster inquiry, expand habits of responsiveness, and promote cultures and processes of deliberation which, amidst ongoing conditions of uncertainty, yield decisions which can guide evolution and improvement of educational policy and practice while not jeopardizing stability and legitimacy.

4. INQUIRY, RESPONSIVENESS, AND DELIBERATION

Populist expression, in maximal formations, is a product of multiple factors of the present social environment. Globalization, both economic and cultural, has engendered a dynamic of winners and losers:

Losers of globalisation include those whose cultural values are challenged by growing multiculturalism; those who, after decades of delocalisation, feel that their knowledge

and skills are no longer economically valuable; and those who feel that citizens' political sovereignty is being eroded by international political and economic agenda. Populism unites those left behind in their grievances. (Sant, 2021, p. 55)

We can see these challenges to multiculturalism in Israel's enclosure of the national identity of the Jewish majority within purely religious boundaries and narratives, in revised civics textbooks. We see similar challenges in the U.S., where book banning efforts by groups like Moms for Liberty target stories featuring racial and ethnic minority groups, GLBTQ families and persons, or people with non-binary gender identities. Brazil's conservative Christian populism has targeted Freirean, feminist, and anti-homophobic curriculum and teaching. These grievances against multiculturalism have many ways of being communicated, as changing forms of media has "facilitated the spread of populist discourses" (Sant, 2021, p. 54). Both these conditions combine to demonstrate a deep pluralism and polarization which increasingly marks public life in liberal democracies. Finalized forms of "reasonable" solutions of the traditional liberal state consensus thus seem increasingly unavailable. Radical democratic theorists tell us that we should renounce governance goals of consensus as "forms of escapism" and thereby "face the challenge that the recognition of the pluralism of values entails" (Mouffe 2000, p. 9).

Where Mouffe is mistaken, however, is that democracy does not require any permanent forms of consensus (Vasilev, 2015). Governance, in conditions of deep pluralism, requires something less finalized, but perhaps no less challenging: *conditions fostering inquiry, responsiveness, and deliberation* which, amidst ongoing conditions of uncertainty, yield decisions which can guide evolution and improvement of educational policy and practice while not jeopardizing stability and legitimacy. When emergent publics become maximalized into the expressive and activist politics of authoritarian, ethno-nationalist, and religious populisms, associational democracy loses its potential for realizing political processes necessary for inclusive democratic decision-making in pluralist societies. Democratic politics in education which are characterized by inquiry, responsiveness, and deliberation are needed to ensure that populist challenges help improve and expand the inclusivity of, and access to, liberal-democratic educational institutions.

Conditions of *inquiry* are a challenge everywhere today. In the introduction, I describe an encounter between a locally-elected school official, a representative of a liberal democratic education institution, and a person representing a civic group — Moms for Liberty — articulating a populist demand. Two distinct political habits conflict here: the habit of question-asking, signaling a willingness to engage in shared inquiry, versus the habit of articulating a demand,

the assertive expression of a formalized request. This encounter is a moment of contingency, potentially foreclosed by demand rather than an exploration of the problem at hand using forms of social intelligence. The formation of a public is an outcome of social inquiry relative to a specific issue, what Dewey called “problematic situations” (Dewey, 1938, p. 109; Frega, 2010). Inquiry is necessitated by a Deweyan “problematic situation,” which is an indeterminate social condition requiring experimental methods of thinking, action, reflection, and discovery between different interests and identities. As Frega describes:

Reasons as well as interests, values, and political aims are the tentative and fallible outcomes of the political process itself. Through public inquiry, interests and aims are neither merely pursued nor simply justified: they are first of all constructed through the deliberative confrontation carried on according to the epistemological paradigm of inquiry. (Frega, 2010, p. 30).

Populist associations often limit their inquiry to the problems and conditions experienced by a limited, particular set of interests and identities, as organizing is often limited to like-minded persons and groups. Conservative Brazilians have organized and built coalitions across political and religious differences, to formulate a tactical alliance of positions and political power oriented towards traditional conservative values. Theirs is a problem-posing articulation; one that helps formulate a description of the problem that matches the lived and social experiences of those among their bounded association or group of conservative actors. Their inquiry is thus far limited to the project of understanding and organizing the articulation of the demand. This is Mouffe’s “political” arena, of contestation and conflict. To enter the arena of the politics, of process and procedure amongst a pluralist, broader public, the inquiry must be opened up to broader reasoning and investigation, the condition of entering the democratic institutional arena. Refusal of inquiry beyond the bounds of a single associative perspective can too easily lead to an “epistemology of certainty” which can often define populist projects (Moreira, 2022). Laclau’s populism embraces the contingency of the political, but the ultimate goal is critique, and the demand, which can often halt rather than evolving inquiry towards institutions or officials.

The condition of *responsiveness* reflects a need for democratic institutions to respond to the evolving needs and challenges of its people. As citizens, we expect our liberal democratic state institutions to be responsive towards changing social, cultural, and other conditions experienced by citizens, including threats posed to liberal rights and freedoms. Government representatives expect that associations of citizens will be responsive to reasons and conditions which represent the inclusive pluralist state’s diverse interests and goals. This dual sense of political responsiveness has become threatened in a world

where global, neoliberal economic policies have exacerbated inequality and made many governments generally more responsive to corporate and private interests and actors than to its own citizens. This, in turn, has made citizens groups more antagonistic.

Sant (2021) notes the rise of Chilean populism as fostered by global conditions which have fostered institutional rigidity and resistance to democratic movements for equality:

Chileans were told for thirty years that they were a democratic country, but there was little in their regime that signalled an equal distribution of powers and many felt that their dignity had never been restored. In Chile, as in many other countries, the 'neoliberal good life' was so institutionalised that there is not much scope for debate and none for equality. (p. 77)

Populist politics will continue to appeal to citizens as long as representatives of state institutions refuse to engage with citizen associations. As Peterson (2022) notes, populism has become legitimized "because the promises of equality and popular sovereignty central to democratic systems are not realized for everyone" (p. 1429). Yet this is a tricky premise when it comes to ethno-nationalist, anti-secular, and homophobic forms of populism which are threatening democratic liberal principles in Israel, Brazil and the United States. Civic or political groups which demand a selective historical narrative of nationhood presented in books or curriculum, which refuses an accurate, complex portrayal of a nation-state's development and identity, will present interests which fail the democratic test of inclusivity. This does not mean that democratic institutions and representatives can justify an unresponsiveness towards these groups or interests. Government's role is to be "an institutional device to master consequences in the interest of publics," and much rides on "the manner in which the needs and views of the public are taken into consideration" (Frega, 2019, p. 192). In the end, democratic politics should, at the level of state institutions, provide "an initial descriptive and normative yardstick for analyzing democratic processes—their capacity to favor an inclusive constitution of publics" (Ibid.). Responsiveness to all groups and interests is the promise to be open to consideration of reasons and demands presented by citizens and civic associations, and to engage with conflict productively. This responsiveness is a requirement of all democratic groups and actors, both those within state institutions and those representing populist publics.

The failure of established political organizations and democratic processes to mediate and integrate conflict productively is problematic, which, in turn, provides undemocratic, authoritarian, racist, or populist parties and personalities the room

to participate in or even dominate politics and the governing process. (Peterson, Brunkhorst, & Seliger, 2022, p. 1343)

Responsiveness to agonist forms of politics requires not an acquiescence to illiberal demands of authoritarian groups, but likely requires that state institutions develop designs to better mediate and facilitate productive inquiry and deliberation around populist challenges, of all ideologies and stripes (Lowndes, & Paxton, 2018).

Finally, we come to the discussion of *deliberation* and its requisite facilitative conditions. Talk and reason-giving, over force and coercion, characterize democratic political principles. Deliberation is a quality of democratic decision-making and disagreement. Purist forms of deliberative political processes eschew simple majoritarian and aggregate forms of decision-making and are thus difficult to scale for even small liberal-democratic institutions. But to assert that deliberative processes of inquiry and exchange must be a central aspect of representative democracy decision-making is a rather uncontroversial claim or should be. Processes of deliberation are central to a pragmatist political theory and assume that participants enter with an ability to adapt their beliefs in the face of good reasons. As Frega (2012) notes,

The theory of inquiry states that processes of public deliberation are rational as long as they are backed by reference to experience and arguments in the give and take of reasons through which agents fix and transform their beliefs in their common search for shared solutions to problematic issues. (p. 273)

Deliberation is built upon dialogic exchange, and represents a core element of democratic legitimacy. Yet one of the tremendous challenges of present disagreements around schooling in pluralist societies are the strident and barn-burning forms of political exchange under which they are proposed. White and Neblo (2021) note the forms of affective polarization that have broken down productive political deliberation in many democratic societies. The controversies over masking during the COVID pandemic which took place in the U.S. and other places is a key example, and an incident that many trace to the expansion of populist politics in education today. In these debates, there was little room for compromise or middle ground; anti-masking families saw mask mandates as curtailing their fundamental liberties as parents. Maskers versus anti-maskers became positions which hardened into enemies on the political battlefield. Affective and belief polarization around various stances towards masking and vaccines quickly turned into intractable identity and lifestyle positions (Talisie, 2019). School districts in the U.S., caught in the middle between various positions and interests involved in these disputes, were set up for a legitimacy crisis as

any ground for deliberation became very narrow. “We will say that a crisis of legitimacy exists for a given agency to the degree that its policies are met with widespread or intensive resistance” (White, & Neblo, 2021, p. 175).

How does one deliberate with the Other? This is increasingly the question we ask ourselves — no matter what our position or status — in our polarized societies. When a policy-making body is approached by a citizen or a group of citizens with a demand, the initial response is to recoil, reject, or respond in kind, with conditions or counter-demands of our own. The deep pluralism we face in public life today strains the boundaries of deliberative imagination. Publics now form around the interests of healthy growth and development of gender non-binary children and youth, increasingly identified in many societies, and whose equal access to safe, inclusive spaces in state schooling is demanded. The very idea of gender as a social construct, as one example, is great flux, and has both emancipatory and threatening possibilities, depending on your positionality and interests. Non-binary gender identities are challenging to many on various grounds, including religious and cultural. If we consider democracy as a social-political formation that must evolve, or die, finding ways to deliberate about seemingly intractable positions, we can see that it will require a great deal of creative experimentation when it comes to bringing diverse publics to the table of exchange and negotiation (Shuffelton, 2022). This experimentation is essential, however, in the face of any populist challenge to liberal democratic institutions, and particularly those whose purposes are oriented towards children, an arena which crosses the public/private domain, and around which much parental fear circulates. Is it possible for educational institutions to build legitimacy through processes which build deliberative processes for decision-making, thereby making educational bureaucracies more responsive, more flexible, more informed by the pluralist societies they serve?

I have argued that populism can be democracy-enhancing for educational institutions when it helps propel state institutions to achieve liberal-democratic principles of inclusion and equality. Minimalist populism, when it consists of an association of citizens organizing on behalf of demands that are presently unheard or unacknowledged by state institutions of schooling, can enable greater legitimacy and stability for schools and education systems. These goals can emerge from a democratic politics which understand the state as a liberal-democratic institution that must be sensitive and responsive to the publics and associations that its citizens organically form over time. State-supported schooling in multiple liberal democratic nations is under the press of fundamental challenge by authoritarian, ethno-national, and religious orthodox forms of populist movements. These maximalist populisms evoke homogeneity over pluralism, and exclusivist over integrated public spheres. Listening to and engaging the fears, displacements, and uncertainties that motivate these movements

requires speaking to, and with, the people that bring these fears to the political arena in the form of anti-democratic demands. These interventions must happen at the legislative and school levels. Deliberations about curriculum must be transparent and, and balance the views of experts with responsiveness to the diverse, representative groups of families, students, and the broader citizenry. Questions of policy and practice must be subject to conditions of genuine inquiry and deliberation. Without such expansive moves in democratic governance and policy-making, our democracies cannot key hope to evolve beyond the present, proto-fascist moment of crisis.

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