Nick Stevenson

Education
and Cultural
Citizenship

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For Alastair Stevenson, Ida James, Eve James,
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About the Author

Nick Stevenson is a Reader in Cultural Sociology, University of Nottingham. His most recent books include *David Bowie* (2006, Polity Press), *Cultural Citizenship* (2003, OUP), *Culture and Citizenship* (2001, Sage), *Understanding Media Cultures* (2001, Sage) *Making Sense of Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (written with Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks) (Polity, 2000) and *The Transformation of the Media* (1999, Longman). He is currently writing a short book on freedom for Routledge.

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Introduction

What kind of education is suitable for citizens of modern democratic and culturally diverse modern societies? This is the question that has troubled me most while writing this book. Notably, as we shall see, it has also puzzled a number of the leading writers on education. There is, however, no one simple answer to this question. How we respond to this issue inevitably depends upon the point in time and space within which we seek to address questions of cultural development and democracy. Indeed, one of the arguments I shall be making here is how we might locate ourselves in terms of some of these debates, but at the same time reconstruct these arguments in new times. There is no 'neutral' answer to this question despite the agnostic view offered by some liberals. That we seek to positively identify the values of democracy will inevitably mean that we prefer certain ways of organising, living and practising education to others. For the most part this book adopts an approach that is often referred to within critical theory as 'immanent critique'. The aim of critical theory is not only to produce self-reflection and criticism, but also to argue that if education is to become meaningful then we would need to revise our current practices and seek to struggle for a more democratic society. However, in this process we have to start from where we currently stand and recognise that the realisation of a democratic education could only take place in a reconstructed society. Such a society is unlikely to arrive in any pristine form but will depend upon citizens and social movements seeking to combat social and cultural forms that aim to close down the possibility of the emergence of a culturally pluralistic, dialogic and learning education system and society. Here we will need to understand 'education' not only as a diverse set of practices that takes place within formal settings of learning like schools, colleges and universities, but also more broadly involves the media of mass communication, popular culture, literature and social movements. Here I would follow Antonio Gramsci (1971: 40) who argues that for education to be described as democratic it 'must mean that every "citizen" can "govern" and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this'. This would mean that our democratic 'education' as citizens does not end at the school gates but includes relationships inside families, in front of the television, on the computer, inside the workplace and within civil society more generally. In this respect questions of education face in a number of directions all at once.

In making these claims I am inevitably drawing upon my own experiences and intellectual preferences as a British academic working in an

institution of higher education. My own intellectual journey from the working class to the educated middle class undoubtedly colours many of the arguments discussed within this volume. This does not mean of course that many people who have made a similar transition will necessarily understand this experience in the same way that I have done. Further, I have tried as hard as possible to argue from the point of view of a critic who is keen to preserve and extend the practice of democracy in increasingly difficult times. It is just that I am aware that had I encountered education differently I might have written a different kind of book.

My argumentative strategy is to defend both a democratic form of education and one that seeks to include a wide variety of cultural experiences that are compatible with these values. There is no vision of education or understanding of its practice that is not based upon a view of the good society. Much of the debate that goes on within education it seems to me deliberately obscures this argument by reducing the role of education to overly instrumental and technical criteria. Often it seems there is no vision of the good society to defend but simply a view of education as raising 'aspirations' or of people gaining access to more and better employment. What this book seeks to achieve is to clarify the principles that are at stake in these arguments, and suggest the different ways in which the practice of democracy might become enhanced through education. In this book I want to look more closely at the meaningful practice of education and how it might serve a democratic as opposed to an authoritarian or consumerist ethos.

This book does not seek to argue from the position of scientifically conceived neutrality. This is because I doubt that such a position exists, and I think that education and the practice of democracy are more closely linked than many currently think. Indeed, part of the task I have taken on here is to rethink a number of complex and often overlapping traditions of thinking that can help us understand how education is linked to democratic forms of practice. However, before proceeding any further I had better explain what I mean by democracy and why I think it is important.

If I might at this point be allowed a personal story. My own initial education was fairly unremarkable. The infant and junior schools I attended were authoritarian places where a minor breach of the rules could often lead to harsh punishments. The schools were well ordered and disciplined but offered little by the way of creativity or imagination. With football and comic reading being my only escape these were not on the whole (with some notable exceptions) places of enjoyable learning. If anything they were mostly disciplinary institutions that passed on basic skills, but expected very little of their students. At my secondary school most of my male peers were encouraged to specialise in certain subjects (mainly wood work, metal work and technical drawing) so that they could gain employment in the wider economy. Many of the other boys were targeted by the armed services and most of the girls were taught cookery and needlework as preparation for a life of domesticity. Despite these features most of my education disallowed any critical discussion of the wider world that myself

and my classmates would soon be moving into. Other than an occasional discussion within say Geography, History or English there was little sense that I was a democratic citizen in the making. This meant no discussion of labour history, feminism, racism, multiculturalism, the peace movement or any of the intellectual questions raised by these particular concerns. There was indeed very little discussion of questions that might be called ethical or moral or that asked us what kinds of people we wished to become. Education as it was practised was about passing exams to gain access to either craft apprenticeships in industry or office work. It did not seem to be about the development of curiosity, asking difficult questions or the wider development of our interests.

However, soon after leaving school I was to encounter a number of sub-cultural (namely punk, soul, Mod and the New Romantics), political (labour movement, feminism and peace) and literary (mainly Camus, Kafka, Orwell and Sartre) concerns that seemed to be asking what was it ethical to become and how I might live a meaningful, passionate and democratic life. In other words this discordant collection of cultures (not all pulling in the same direction) asked questions in a way that I had never encountered in school. Indeed, while at work I was sent on a day-release course and despite my initial sense of excitement was soon to realise that this was less about learning than training. However, this proved to be an important time for me as I was to meet other similarly alienated young people who introduced me to a world of books, music and ideas that I had not previously encountered. Much later, after eventually entering university, I discovered that education could be a place of critical inquiry and questioning in a way that did not seem to be the case in school. By this time I had formulated a number of questions that I wished to pursue and was lucky enough to find a university that offered the literary, philosophical, sociological and historical courses that might enable me to find some answers. Later, when thinking back over my life, I was struck by the difference between my early formal stages of learning and the sense of cultural vibrancy I had encountered within at least some aspects of politics, popular culture, literature and later higher education.

Since this period I have now become a parent. My children's education is of course quite different from my own, mainly due to the new class position I now occupy. Theirs is a world of books, new technology, school league tables, multi-channel television and numerous after-school clubs that is quite alien to the world in which I grew up. There is no sense that they are being prepared for life on a factory floor and the school seems genuinely interested in them as people. Yet if my early education was to prepare me for the labour market I am not sure that my children's education is any different. There is a deep concern amongst educationalists that the current focus upon passing exams, teaching to test and increasingly instrumental modes of learning is failing to develop the educational capacities of citizens in the making. In other words, if I 'learned to labour' I sometimes think that my children are being trained for the knowledge economy. If the modern

economy no longer requires unskilled and skilled labour in the same ways that it did in the past the new requirements of the knowledge economy are for workers who have mastered basic literacy and keyboard skills, who are positive, hard-working, and whose idea of the good society is successful upward mobility. Here I would like to ask if these are the kinds of educated citizens required by a modern democracy? Are there indeed dangers in the context of the 'knowledge society' of education losing its value, as the economy mostly requires useful knowledge? If children are increasingly being taught to test (as seems to be the case) what happens to the ability to be able to think more independently and develop your own passions? If the needs of the economy continue to be the defining feature within education what space is there for what might be called a citizen's education? Educational institutions are undoubtedly places of learning, but which identities are made available to us there, and how important are they in making us into the kinds of people we later go on to become? To what extent is it legitimate to use education as a means of training for the labour market, and what should be the limits of this imperative? To what extent should education simply be about itself, and what are its responsibilities to the wider community? These are just some of the questions I aim to investigate within this book.

Obviously these are important questions for any society that calls itself democratic. If by democracy we mean a society that simply allows for competition between different points of view then this probably only makes minimal claims on the organisation of education. However, if what we mean by democracy includes the possibility of participation, listening, the capacity to change your mind or at least form an opinion, cultural inclusion and a society where we can deliberate on roughly equal terms then this would suggest certain forms of education rather than others. Further, if these ideas are to be meaningful then this would mean the development of an approach to education where young people were not simply 'objects' to be weighed and measured, but where they were subjects in their own right with their own ideas and passions. Here my argument is not that education should have no link to the economy (this does not seem to be possible) but that the primary driving force of education should be one that gives a priority to learning and not training, freedom and not prescription, and initiative and not conformity. Democracy in this argument is a practice as much for the classroom as it is for more public encounters. These are not new ideas. As we shall see, that democracy relies upon the critical and thoughtful nature of its citizens to govern both themselves as well as the societies in which they live lies at the heart of a long tradition of educated thinking.

However, please note that I have used the term cultural citizenship rather than democracy. This is because the idea of democracy is often associated with different systems of representation and voting procedures. By adopting the term cultural citizenship I was more concerned to group together a number of different questions that were not simply focused on questions of procedure but also on the development of cultural competencies,

sensibilities and capacities within future and current citizens. In particular, the word 'culture' is important here as a way of signifying the different ways in which we might be said to participate meaningfully and critically within the broader society. It is not by virtue of our humanness or our individuality that we understand our place in the world but this can only be done through a diversity of cultural perspectives that make the world meaningful for us. Here I follow a hermeneutical tradition of argument that suggests there is no human life without the capacity to make meaning. This does not limit the inquiry to a particular view of human nature, and yet it is hard to write on education unless we believe at some level that human beings are capable of learning and of interpreting both their own and others' actions in different ways. As cultural beings then we are always caught in multiple webs of linguistic meaning. Following Clifford Geertz (1973) culture might be thought of as a web of significance spun by human action and interpretation. The task of interpreting meaning does not require us to get inside people's heads, but to understand instead the intersubjective nature of linguistic practices. We have no choice but to try and make sense of our lives in the context of the cultures in which we live. We are all, following Paul Ricoeur (1991), compelled to create a sense of our selves through particular cultural stories or narratives. How we construct and remake these narratives depends upon the meeting point between our agency, cultural context and of course wider social structures. For Ricoeur in order to construct ourselves we need access to different traditions of thinking so that they might be remade or indeed re-interpreted in the context of our own lives. How we create our lives and fashion our narratives has both a poetic and a moral component. Refusing the separation between morality and aesthetics, Ricoeur argues we are responsible for the choices we make in fashioning our personal narratives and how these then become connected to the wider community (Wall 2005).

These arguments provide one of the ways we can link questions of 'culture' to those of 'citizenship'. By 'citizenship' I mean our connection to particular social and cultural locations, the possibility of a participatory involvement in shaping our society and our understanding of our rights and responsibilities. Much has been made of the idea of citizenship in recent times, and here I would seek to defend an active, republican concept that is not neutral about the role of the citizen in democratically participating in the common life of our society. The idea of cultural citizenship therefore seeks to look at the diversity of competencies and capacities that need to be available within a democratic context to enable acts of public criticism, compassion or concern. My sense in this respect is that the cultural realm remains absolutely central to the ways in which the vast majority of people understand their role within the wider community. Returning to Ricoeur, how we choose to live our lives in relation to global injustices or oppressive systems of domination inevitably invites us to be creative agents. We can seek to reshape larger and more collective narratives as well as those connected to our personal lives. This might involve us defending the difference

of the Other, arguing for justice, seeking to democratise powerful social structures, making a stand for what we believe to be 'right' or indeed living lives of service in respect of the wider community. The creativity of our shared moral lives requires not only a capacity to challenge the collective wisdom on particular issues, but also a broader understanding of the different human possibilities and a diversity of ways of living our individual as well as collective lives. Education as we shall see remains a vital resource in connecting questions of culture to those of citizenship.

We live in a time of transition. The relatively recent arrival of a consumer, technologically literate, diverse and largely politically disengaged society is changing the ways in which citizenship is experienced by the vast majority of the population. However, we also live in a world that is becoming more multicultural, unequal, global and environmentally uncertain. This means that the way we think about education needs to change, but that it also needs to do so by re-engaging with different cultural traditions and not by simply starting again. More specifically I would seek to return to the traditions of liberal socialism. This is for two main reasons. First, liberal socialist arguments recognise there is no 'Big Bang' theory of emancipation and remain as sceptical of authoritarianism on the political Right as the political Left. If liberal socialism historically sought to combine the values of liberty and equality it did so without believing in utopian solutions to social and cultural problems. Instead there is a concern that much of the Marxist Left are as authoritarian as the capitalist society they justifiably seek to criticise. Rather than arguing for a revolutionary transformation of society liberal socialism has sought to promote the idea of a common civic culture that is both relatively egalitarian and liberal. Historically this has meant support for an interventionist state that sought to contain the market, address inequality and protect civil rights. And yet the political Right sought to remake mass education in the interests of employers while preserving an elite education for the privileged. R.H. Tawney (1961) argued that capitalist society in this respect seeks to emphasise rights as opposed to responsibilities. This ultimately lead to a destructive form of individualism that simply ends with the right to secure for yourself a privileged education and high levels of personal consumption. Tawney, by reconnecting rights and responsibilities, sought to emphasise a sense of obligation to the wider community. Such a move, as we shall see, opens up the possibility of citizens not only being offered relatively equal opportunities, but also an educated culture that could enable them to develop themselves as cultural beings and not simply as raw material for 'use' in the workplace. The demand that ordinary working-class people have the right to an intellectual life and that the education system should prepare its citizens for a life within a shared community has had a long history within liberal socialist thinking. The historian Jonathan Rose (2001) has demonstrated how within the working class during the twentieth century before the rise of the mass media there existed a culture of mutual improvement based less upon reading radical texts, and more upon understanding complex works of literature. This history

often found expression within the labour movement. Here many trade-union leaders spoke of their sense of exclusion from opportunities to engage in a culture of learning. What I continue to find valuable about the liberal socialist tradition is the idea that education should not be reduced to the needs of the economy and its suspicion of authoritarianism of all kinds. As Tawney (1964) was to argue, the liberal socialist critique of capitalism was just as concerned with questions of inequality and poverty as it was with the possibility of developing a new politics of citizenship. This new politics was concerned about the effects of atomised individualism and sought to connect rights, community and responsibility. Tawney recognised that economic power could undermine democracy and the quality of civic life by converting education into a means of training for the economy. Tawney (1964: 168) argued that the struggle for a democratic society promoted the argument that if 'to lead a life worthy of human beings is confined to a minority, what is commonly called freedom would more properly be described as privilege'. For Tawney a community that made life worth living would need to be built upon a sense of mutual responsibility and the freedom to develop the self. Here the question that begins to emerge is what a democratic as well as a genuinely inclusive education might be like. However, as I have indicated, there is no simple return to these ideas; instead, as we shall see, the idea of a critical and inclusive education produces a number of different problems and questions.

Liberty, equality and culture

While my own personal educational story began in the 1960s I want to return for a short while to the 1860s. Here I shall investigate a dispute between two English liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century. The 1860s no less than the 1960s were a key decade in respect of the argument of this book. Mathew Arnold and John Stuart Mill shared a good deal (amongst other things a love of the work of Marcus Aurelius) in that they both argued for the progressive potential of a democratic as opposed to an aristocratically dominated society. Further they sought to identify the appropriate culture for a democratic society. Both were formed by an Enlightenment-based culture that valued freedom of thought rather than the imposition of authority, as well as the idea of equal rights and democratic rule (Todorov 2009). And both were seeking to argue how these principles might best be established through education and political culture more generally. Democracy they each agreed would need to be different from an aristocratic society where the ability to rule was a matter of status and rank rather than discussion and persuasion. Arnold and Mill continue to remain important not only for the ways in which they chose to answer these questions but also because of the huge influence that they had in terms of defining the terms of the debate. They both asked what kind of shared culture was appropriate for democracy, and what role might the