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Democratic Education

Jonathan Marks

University of Michigan Law School

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DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION. By *Amy Gutmann*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1987. Pp. xii, 291. \$19.95.

Educational policy is simultaneously a subject of great dispute and of unparalleled significance. More than preparing children to "function in society," education shapes the attitudes and preferences of future citizens. In a democratic society the views of citizens become the policies of a nation, and for this reason education has the potential to determine America's political future. Amy Gutmann¹ recognizes this power and in *Democratic Education* proposes a theory of education which distributes educational authority in a manner she believes to be consistent with democratic government.

Gutmann contends that a comprehensive theory of education is necessary if citizens are to assess and judge policy options. Rather than arguing in favor of any particular vision of the morally ideal education, Gutmann attempts to answer the following question: Who

1. Amy Gutmann is an Associate Professor of Politics at Princeton University and the author of *LIBERAL EQUALITY* (1980).

should make educational policy? She asserts that these policy decisions should be the result of democratic consensus. Educational practices must reconcile the competing claims of parental authority, responsible citizenship, and individual liberty. She concludes that political majorities should decide educational policy as long as that policy is not repressive or discriminatory. Gutmann's theory of education additionally requires that future citizens be taught the skills and values necessary to democratic processes. Schools must teach these abilities not only because our society values democratic methods, but also because future citizens will have to make democratic decisions about the education of the next generation.

Chapter 1 explains and defends the theory against more traditional views. Gutmann goes on to consider the implications of her principles and to refine them by evaluating their practical consequences. She accomplishes this "translation of political principles into practice" (p. 17) through a discussion of the democratic purposes of primary schooling (ch. 2). Gutmann uses this "groundwork" for consideration of the dimensions of democratic participation (ch. 3), the limits of democratic authority (ch. 4), and the distribution of primary schooling (ch. 5). She then applies democratic principles to higher education (chs. 6 and 7), educational institutions other than schools (ch. 8), and adult education (ch. 9). She concludes by showing how democratic education is consistent with the assertion that politics is a form of education. While Gutmann provides a comprehensive discussion of educational policy, her conclusions are not always consistent with the democratic theory she advocates. A detailed explanation of her theoretical development and an analysis of her conclusions demonstrate this weakness.

In chapter 1 Gutmann begins her explication of democratic education by considering three traditional views of the control of education. She rejects each in turn but takes principles from each which help forge her democratic theory. She describes these alternatives as the family state, the state of families, and the state of individuals (p. 22). The family state seeks to foster a "like-mindedness and camaraderie among citizens that most of us expect to find only within families" (p. 23). All members are educated to accept the single, "correct" vision of the good life.² State control over education is absolute and its aim is to inculcate in children a desire to pursue the true good life rather than other inferior alternatives. Gutmann rejects the family state because, even if there is such a thing as *the* good life (which she doubts) (pp. 28, 44), parents and citizens have differing conceptions as to what

2. For discussion of the "family state" approach see PLATO, *Crito*, in *THE LAST DAYS OF SOCRATES* (H. Tredennick trans. 1969); PLATO, *THE REPUBLIC* (B. Jowett trans. 1941); B. WILLIAMS, *ETHICS AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY* (1985); B. WILLIAMS, *The Truth in Relativism*, in *MORAL LUCK* (1981); K. POPPER, *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES* (5th ed. 1966).

constitutes a just society for them and their children. Adult citizens who have not yet discovered *the* good life, have a right to try to perpetuate their vision. For this reason they are entitled to a share of educational authority which undermines the state's claim to total control.

The state of families is at the opposite extreme.³ It places exclusive responsibility for education in the hands of parents. They may thus predispose their children to choose a way of life consistent with their preferences. Gutmann condemns the insulation of children from exposure to different attitudes and preferences. Rather, an education must develop the ability to choose among competing conceptions of the good life. Since children are members of both families and the state, both have a claim to educational authority.⁴

While the family state and the state of families justify instruction that biases children towards some conceptions of the good life, the state of individuals demands absolute neutrality in the teaching of values.⁵ It supposes that all understandings of the good life are valid and that education should not bias children toward any particular view.⁶ Educational authority in the state of individuals should be exercised exclusively by professional educators who not only must avoid bias, but also must teach the skills necessary to individual choice among differing conceptions. Gutmann's criticism of this view of educational control is that we value education not just for the liberty of choice that it encourages, but for the virtue that it bestows on children. Society has an interest in predisposing children to only a select range of choices that will allow them to flourish and function in a democratic society. Additionally, she notes that neutrality among virtues is itself controversial. Indifference among virtues offends supporters of moral education as much as instruction in only one view of the good life represses those who favor a different view.⁷

3. For discussion of the "state of families," see M. FRIEDMAN, *CAPITALISM AND FREEDOM* (1962); J. COONS & S. SUGARMAN, *EDUCATION BY CHOICE: THE CASE FOR FAMILY CONTROL* (1978); Schrag, *The Right to Educate*, 79 *SCH. REV.* 359 (1971); C. FRIED, *RIGHT AND WRONG* (1978); J. LOCKE, *TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT* (Second Treatise) (P. Laslett rev. ed. 1963); N. TARCOV, *LOCKE'S EDUCATION FOR LIBERTY* (1984).

4. *But see* Wisconsin v. Yoder, 406 U.S. 205 (1972). In *Yoder*, the Supreme Court considered the state's interest in having all of its citizens reasonably well educated so that they could participate in political affairs and become economically self-sufficient. However, that interest was not sufficient to deny the rights of the Amish to the free exercise of their religion. Thus the parent's claim to educational authority overrode the state's interests.

5. See B. ACKERMAN, *SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE LIBERAL STATE* (1980), for a defense of liberal neutrality.

6. For discussion of the "state of individuals" see J.S. MILL, *On Liberty*, in *UTILITARIANISM, LIBERTY, AND REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT* (E.P. Dutton ed. 1951); I. KANT, *THE EDUCATIONAL THEORY OF IMMANUEL KANT* (E.F. Buchner trans. 1904); B. ACKERMAN, *supra* note 5.

7. Gutmann has changed her views on this approach to education. At one time she favored only those educational techniques that maximized the future freedom of children. See Gutmann, *Children, Paternalism, and Education: A Liberal Argument*, 9 *PHIL. & PUB. AFF.* 338 (1980).

Gutmann finds none of the three traditional views satisfying. The problem remains: education cannot and should not be morally neutral. How then should society determine which values to teach future citizens? Gutmann first defines an inclusive ground on which to justify non-neutral education — a commonly held virtue broad enough to permit differing views of the good life to flourish. That virtue is a commitment to “conscious social reproduction.” She states, “We are committed to collectively re-creating the society that we share. Although we are not collectively committed to any particular set of educational aims, we are committed to arriving at an agreement on our educational aims . . .” (p. 39). Therefore, while education cannot avoid biases towards some conceptions, differing views of virtue, the good life, and moral character can coexist within the notion of conscious social reproduction. The principle leaves room for citizens collectively to shape education in their society. Each view may be put forward in the democratic process, and while those preferred by the majority will be favored in our schools, no view may be repressed. At the same time all children must be educated so that they can share in consciously reproducing their society when they become adults. Future citizens must learn the skills that allow them to represent their views in the democratic process and the attitudes that make them tolerant of differences as well as democratic outcomes.

Democratic education combines many aspects of the three traditional approaches which Gutmann rejects. Educational authority is shared by the state, parents and professional educators. Like the family state a democratic state seeks to teach a societal virtue — the democratic virtue of conscious social reproduction, which aims to predispose children towards those values consistent with the sharing of rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. Like the state of families, the democratic state recognizes that parents have an interest in shaping the education of their children, but only within the limits set by democracy. Like the state of individuals, a democratic state favors participation of professional educators in developing choice among “good lives.” But it is the ability to evaluate these choices and to appreciate moral values common to this society that democracy respects, not the neutrality among all moral views that is the basis of the state of individuals.

The primary purpose of democratic education is to develop what Gutmann calls “deliberative” or “democratic” character. Nurturing democratic character involves two crucial components. First, schools must teach moral reasoning; second, they must inculcate moral character. Moral reasoning includes thinking critically about authority and permits future citizens to evaluate competing moral claims and choose among them. Consequently they can understand their own preferences and participate in developing social preferences. Moral character, on the other hand, fosters behavior in accordance with au-

thority (p. 51). Society has an interest in perpetuating certain moral values. Schools must teach these values, but only in conjunction with instilling the ability to think critically about the moral appropriateness of authority.

While Gutmann favors a democratic procedure for choosing among programs of moral education, there are two limits on the democratic authority that she advocates. The first, nonrepression, prevents society from restricting rational deliberation among competing conceptions of the good life. The second, nondiscrimination, prohibits society from excluding educable citizens from adequate education. Both are essential to conscious social reproduction and both prevent the majority from implementing educational policies that are undemocratic.

Throughout the work, Gutmann uses her democratic theory to consider numerous contemporary educational controversies. For example, in chapter 5 she considers the distribution of primary education and the funding of public schools. Her funding formula calls on the state to identify schools that provide an adequate education. In order for democratic education to be adequate, it must do more than produce functionally literate students who can find employment; it must also demand from students the ability to think about democratic politics, and must develop deliberative skills so that future citizens can effectively participate in conscious social reproduction. Gutmann defines this level of education as the "democratic threshold." Once the state identifies schools which produce children at the democratic threshold, it must then increase funding to inadequate schools such that they can meet this level of education. All funding above the democratic threshold is a matter of democratic discretion. But she also envisions a nondiscretionary element to funding decisions. Implicit, but never defended, is the assumption that increased funds will permit all schools to provide a democratically satisfactory education.

Gutmann considers additional controversies through her democratic analysis including bilingualism (ch. 3), book banning (ch. 4), sex education and sexist education (ch. 4), the role of private schools (ch. 4), school desegregation (ch. 5), the purpose, funding, and admissions practices of institutions of higher education (chs. 6 and 7), the educational role and permissibility of government regulation of libraries and television (ch. 8) and adult education (ch. 9). The theory comfortably answers many of the vexing, current educational problems. However, her answers do not always appear consistent with her democratic theory; ultimately they may only justify her own moral preferences.

The incongruity between theory and application may follow from the fact that while Gutmann proposes a procedure to make educational policy, her procedure is not principle-neutral. The biases of her theory result from the contention that one of the purposes of educa-

tion is to instill certain moral attitudes. Evidently these attitudes should be democratically determined. But while education can be biased towards values favored by the majority, it should follow from her theory that the *process* itself should be morally neutral and should permit the teaching of any values which are not repressive or discriminatory. The difficulty is that the bases of her democratic analysis are the "deepest, shared moral commitments" of American society.⁸ For Gutmann these appear to involve adherence to traditional liberal values.⁹ Yet she is unable to separate the kind of education her theory would produce from the values of her theory of educational authority. Although her theory of decisionmaking should permit a broad range of outcomes, her values infect the process. In essence Gutmann uses notions of our "deepest, shared moral commitments" manifested through the principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination to support her own moral preferences.

Her preferences are most noticeable in the case she makes against the teaching of creationism in public schools. She contends that schools are prevented by the principle of nonrepression from teaching creationism even if the subject is favored by a democratic majority. The principle is violated by the indirect imposition of the religious views of some on all children in the guise of science (p. 103). She finds that the indirect "result of establishing religion in public schools would be to restrict rational deliberation among competing ways of life" (p. 104). She assumes that religious attitudes are intolerant of differences and that the idea of creationism cannot be taught without restricting opposite views. But this does not on its face appear to be the case. It seems possible at least that creationism could be taught as an alternative, even if unconvincing, view in addition to the theory of evolution. Of course, schools would also have to develop the reasoning skills necessary for each child to make a choice, but it does not follow that the choice is restricted by the introduction of a competing conception of human origin. Gutmann lets her biases show when she suggests that schools are bound not "to teach *false* doctrines that threaten to undermine the future prospects of a common democratic education" (p. 103; emphasis added). She thus would prevent the teaching of a doctrine with which she disagrees on the grounds of "nonrepression."

Her probable response to this suggestion would demonstrate the problems discussed above. She states, the case against the teaching of creationism "rests instead on the claim that secular standards consti-

8. P. 21. Gutmann looks to "the most commonly held theories concerning educational purposes, authorities and distributions" in order to develop her own theory.

9. Gutmann admits the need to "use some form of philosophical analysis to defend a set of principles or to determine which set of principles and whose interpretation of them ought to rule." P. 21.

tute a better basis upon which to build a common education for citizenship than any set of sectarian religious beliefs — better because secular standards are both fairer and a firmer basis for peacefully reconciling our differences” (p. 103). Her prohibition of religious instruction is consistent with the admission that her theory rests on principles drawn from our deeply held common values. America has a long history of the separation of church and state. However, if democratic authority is limited only by nonrepression and nondiscrimination, it is difficult to resist a majority decision to teach creationism in the schools. It appears at least possible to teach creationism in a manner which does not limit consideration of other views of the good life. If educational authority truly conformed to the theory Gutmann proposes, it would have to allow creationism in schools if favored by a majority. But as it appears that deeply held common values can also trump democratic decisions, how these “values” are defined determines educational content. The problem for Gutmann is that these values are not set by democratic process.

It is because many will find Gutmann’s version of our deeply held common values intuitively satisfying that *Democratic Education* will be most appealing to an American audience.¹⁰ Gutmann’s principle of conscious social reproduction justifies democratic control over educational authority, limited only by the principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination. Gutmann would claim that by “conscious social reproduction” she means the fostering of the ability in future citizens to deliberate about moral alternatives and arrive at a societal consensus. However, given the extent to which her theory is shaped by current, American, liberal values (which, for her, represent our deeply held common values), Gutmann underestimates the significance of the “reproduction” component. Future citizens who have had democratic educations will favor the reproduction of the society of the previous generation. Although Gutmann’s theory permits the teaching of radical visions of the good life, it appears unlikely to create future citizens who will desire to implement those visions. While one may not find

10. Indeed, Gutmann finds American federalism particularly well suited to fostering democratic participation in the making of education policy. Local public schools under the control of elected school boards can respond to the collective preferences of local communities. Such authority permits more effective control, allows content to vary with area preferences, and facilitates citizen participation. At the same time higher levels of government can set limits on local authority in order to cultivate a common societal culture, teach democratic values, and insure that local preferences are nonrepressive and nondiscriminatory. Professional authority may be exercised through the pressure of teacher’s unions. Unions can demand conditions under which teachers are better able to develop democratic character. There is room as well for student participation which itself can foster the participatory virtues of democratic character.

such a consequence troubling, it is naive to assume that such a result would be the product of a neutral process.

— *Jonathan Marks*