



## Journal of Educational Controversy

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Volume 14

Number 1 *The Ethics of Memory: What Does it Mean to Apologize for Historical Wrongs*

Article 5

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2020

### Review of Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose by Kerry T. Burch

Tony DeCesare

DePaul University, [adecesa1@depaul.edu](mailto:adecesa1@depaul.edu)

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#### Recommended Citation

DeCesare, Tony (2020) "Review of Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose by Kerry T. Burch," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol14/iss1/5>

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Review of *Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose* by Kerry T. Burch. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. The Cultural and Social Foundations of Education, Series Editor, A. G. Rud

Tony DeCesare  
DePaul University

Kerry Burch's (2020) *Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose* stands in stark contrast to the treatment Thomas Jefferson has typically received within recent scholarship in the social and cultural foundations of education. The general tendency among foundations scholars has been to discuss Jefferson largely and often rather superficially as an historical figure from whom we can perhaps take inspiration (and, apparently, little else) in our quest to revive the broad civic and democratic purposes of public education in the United States. Burch, by contrast, aims not only to analyze more thoroughly the radical aspects of Jefferson's political and educational thought—an analysis of penetrating philosophical and historical depth that stands as a clear strength of the book—but also to apply Jefferson's thinking across “past, present, and future space” (9). In doing so, Burch builds an argument for the value of Jefferson's revolutionary thought to our contemporary education context—a context that Burch rightly describes as overrun by a neoliberal ideology that contributes to the devaluation and erasure the civic purpose of schooling and other social institutions. And from this argument, Burch sketches a novel (if, so far, abbreviated) plan for “curricular renovation” that includes the development and defense of a constitutional right to a civic-purposed K-12 education as well as a K-12 curricular redesign grounded in “civic philosophy,” “ecological studies,” and “critical media literacy.”

The novelty of the book also extends to its organization. Burch draws on the “American jeremiad tradition,” arranging the eleven chapters into three parts that correspond to the “jeremiad's three-part thematic structure”: 1) the “promise” of what Burch calls the “mythopoetic Spirit of 76,” within which he both locates and unpacks Jefferson's theory of permanent revolution and takes up John Dewey's and George S. Counts's efforts to recapture this Spirit in their own historical contexts; 2) the “declension,” or betrayal of the moral and democratic ideals underlying the Spirit of 76—most evident in the permanence of war in our society, the rise of corporate dominance (including corporate personhood [115]), and the oligarchic character of our education system (all of which Jefferson railed against); and 3) the “renewal” of this Spirit of 76, or the (re)establishment of the most revolutionary of the values for which the American Revolution was fought.

For this last and most constructive part of the book—the renewal of revolutionary values and its education-related implications—Burch finds inspiration, among other places, in the Declaration of Independence by noting the particular importance of cultivating in citizens a capacity and willingness to revise and an orientation toward dissent (144-148). Indeed, these are the hallmarks of what Burch, borrowing from Danielle Allen, calls “participatory readiness” among democratic citizens. If such readiness is to be achieved—and if Jefferson's ideal of permanent revolution is thus to be realized in our contemporary context—public schools and the curriculum must be (re)designed toward this end. Hence, Burch's most constructive proposals: his development and defense of a constitutional right to a civic-purposed K-12 education and corresponding curricular redesign to support it.

As this brief snapshot of the book suggests, Burch covers a lot of ground here. And yet, importantly, he manages to avoid sacrificing depth for breadth in at least three key aspects of the book. First, his recovery and articulation of Jefferson's thought—most often drawing on Jefferson's private correspondence—is itself a major achievement and will no doubt appeal to readers across disciplines, particularly those interested in Jefferson's more “radical” thought. Second, his care and precision in bringing Jefferson into conversation with Dewey and Counts (among others) serves as a reminder of the enduring appeal of Jefferson's educational and political thought. And finally, his Jeffersonian advocacy for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a right to education, for the redistribution of national resources away from military spending and toward public education, and for a civic-purposed curricular renovation is both powerful and practical (139).

In these respects (among others), the book provides historical insights, philosophical arguments, and political analysis that will surely prove valuable to a wide range of scholars, students, and education practitioners. Indeed, I have only minor quibbles with the substance of the book. For instance, as part of his Jefferson-inspired curricular renovation, Burch develops a proposal for “Civic Philosophy” as an organizing rubric within which we should locate the current subjects of “social studies, government, history, literature, writing, and language courses” (168). But while philosophy as method (and as something students should be “doing” [169]) seems to permeate this rubric, it is never suggested as another potential subject of study alongside these other, more traditional curricular subjects. This is especially curious in light of Jefferson's own study of philosophy and the history in the U.S. of pre-college philosophy programs and philosophy for children movements.

Further, and more important, there is a surprising narrowing of what constitutes civic or democratic “education” in the book's constructive chapters (chapters 9-11). Burch restricts his discussion in these chapters to education as formal schooling and to the education of school-age children and youth (not adult citizens). This is not atypical of foundations scholars who concern themselves with civic or democratic purposes for education.<sup>1</sup> But Burch is so attentive in earlier chapters (especially 3 and 4) to Jefferson's broader thinking about democratic “education”—as including newspapers, libraries, and even his “ward” system of political organization—that readers cannot be blamed for wanting to see how these aspects of Jefferson's educational thought might be taken up as part of a broader idea of education reform in our current context. Surely, democratic schooling (in the formal sense), no matter how good, is insufficient to ensure that young people will—once and for all—acquire the “capacity to revise” or, more broadly, achieve the state of “participatory readiness” that guides Burch's approach to democratic education. Nor, of course, does schooling do much directly to educate adult citizens. What, then, might Jefferson lend to the efforts a democratic society must necessarily undertake to help its citizens—including adults—maintain their willingness to revise and their readiness to participate in our ongoing political renewal? A democratic society's *permanent political revolution*, I would argue, requires citizens' *permanent personal evolution*. And if I am right, we need more philosophical and practical attention to democratic education beyond schooling and beyond children and youth. Among the interesting possibilities that Burch points to but does not take up in the final section of book, we might do particularly well to pursue the educational (not just civic and political) value of Jefferson's wards—those “schools” of self-government” (45; see also 62-63)—and to consider what similar spaces are available in our current civic and political context where the educative potential of democratic participation can be realized.

These might be worthwhile points to take up in relation to a Jeffersonian reconstruction of our educational purpose. But I would suggest that they are secondary to a broader and more fundamental issue that needs to be addressed more thoroughly, namely, the pernicious racial ideologies inherent in Jefferson's thought and their remarkable (though not surprising) durability in our national identity and consciousness—including in our democracy and education.

As Burch acknowledges, some readers might be immediately skeptical of a book that aims to reconstruct our educational purpose (and to revive democracy in the U.S.) on the strength of Jefferson's thought (6). Such skepticism is particularly warranted now, in light of recent socio-cultural and political movements that have heightened our critical awareness of the moral defects of the founders and other historical (and contemporary) figures, particularly when it comes to race. Indeed, a critical mass of citizens has called for his likeness to be removed from public spaces on account of his views on race, and historians have struggled with whether to label Jefferson a rapist in light of his relationship to Sally Hemings.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, Burch consciously avoids either demonizing or uncritically celebrating Jefferson. Instead, he positions Jefferson as a “synecdoche of the nation”—someone who stands for and symbolizes “the ideals, contradictions, hopes, and tragedies gyrating at the nucleus of American political culture” (6). Thus, he embraces Jefferson's moral ambiguity (and moral failings) while also working to demonstrate the unique value that certain aspects of Jefferson's thought (e.g., his theory of permanent revolution) might still have for both our educational and democratic theorizing. This, to my mind, is a reasonable approach—one that takes account of the complicated nature of our history and historical figures. And Burch finds some precedent for this treatment of Jefferson in other thinkers who have been thoroughly and unequivocally embraced by foundations scholars, including, most notably, John Dewey, George Counts, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each engaged and extended Jefferson's thought in and for their own historical, political, and educational contexts. Dewey, in particular, as Burch skillfully demonstrates, was a deep admirer of Jefferson's political-democratic thinking and on at least one occasion admitted the error of not consulting Jefferson earlier in his own philosophical and political thought.

And yet, I cannot help but wonder if there is a missed opportunity here to grapple with the deeper challenges and broader implications for the nation (particularly its Black, Indigenous, and citizens of color) of reconstructing our educational purpose—indeed, our very democracy—from a Jeffersonian perspective, perhaps especially at this unique moment in history. Inherent to this perspective—however we parse or compartmentalize it—are not just Jefferson's “racist pronouncements and practices” (which are well known and, as Burch acknowledges, egregious) but also, and more importantly, his *ideological commitment to preserving a structural and conceptual link between whiteness and democratic citizenship* (and, therefore, *education for democratic citizenship*). And if the way to address this is, as Burch suggests, to develop “non-racialized” versions of certain aspects of Jefferson's thinking—for instance, a racially inclusive conception of Jefferson's own racially qualified “demophilia” (44)—then we have to prioritize and center *that* work. This means grappling with the white supremacist ideology that has defined American democracy (and education) since Jefferson, among others, baked it into our political and moral “ideals.” This, every bit as much as neoliberalism (Burch's primary target here), is the root cause of our democratic crisis and our fractured civic culture.

Critical race scholars, among others, have long (and increasingly) been attentive to issues of race in relation to democracy (and, by extension, education).<sup>3</sup> For instance, Eddie Glaude, in the context of his own calls for a kind of democratic revolution, has argued that this work requires that we address the “value gap”—the idea, “fundamental to who we are as a nation,”

that white people are valued more than black people.<sup>4</sup> Our repeated failure to do so, more than anything else, has limited and continues to limit “the scope and range of democratic life” in the United States.<sup>5</sup> And any attempt, and perhaps especially a Jeffersonian attempt, to reconstruct our educational purpose in the name of civic and democratic renewal—any attempt, through education or other means, to develop a more robust and revolutionary practice of democratic life—will inevitably fail unless and until we can rid ourselves of “the value gap at the heart of the American Idea [which] ensures that no matter the form of our system, it will always produce the same results: racial inequality.”<sup>6</sup>

To recover Jefferson for the sake of reconstructing our educational (and democratic) purposes, then, requires not just that we grapple with his personal racism (so to speak) but also that we really and truly and finally reckon with the structural and systemic white supremacy (and patriarchy) that he helped to *build into* the ideals of American democracy and that is still very much constitutive of this democracy 250 years after Jefferson drew it up. Indeed, Jefferson’s racism is not an anomaly in relation to his political thought; it is inseparable from and significantly informed his political thought. He never imagined “American democracy apart from white supremacy.”<sup>7</sup> And this is in no small part because of his inability to remove the racial qualifications from his demophilia and, more broadly, from his egalitarianism.<sup>8</sup>

That is not to say that we cannot imagine this democracy differently (though our repeated failure to do so is telling). But it is to wonder whether Jefferson is our best means to doing so or whether we might, instead, need to relegate Jefferson to the margins of our contemporary political and educational theorizing in order that we can center other ways of understanding democratic citizenship, education, and sociocultural and political revolution. In other words, perhaps the best way to realize the promise of the ideals of equality and democracy on which our nation was founded is to leave Jefferson in the “past” rather than carrying him into the “present” or “future”—that is, to acknowledge his importance as an historical figure but to look elsewhere for current and future inspiration in reconstructing our educational and democratic purpose.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tony DeCesare, “Centering Democratic Education: Public School as Civic Centers,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 51, p. 33-43. One notable exception can be found in Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, especially Chapter 9).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Farah Stockman, “Monticello is done avoiding Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings.” *The Washington Post* (June 16, 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/16/us/sally-hemings-exhibit-monticello.html>; Annie Gowen, “As statues of Founding Fathers topple, debate rages over where protesters should draw the line.” *The Washington Post* (July 7, 2020). Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/as-statues-of-founding-fathers-topple-debate-rages-over-where-protesters-should-draw-the-line/2020/07/07/5de7c956-bfb7-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/as-statues-of-founding-fathers-topple-debate-rages-over-where-protesters-should-draw-the-line/2020/07/07/5de7c956-bfb7-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Kathy Hytten and Kurt Stenhagen, “The Color of Democracy: Outlining, Owning up to and (Maybe) Overcoming Democracy’s Whiteness Problem.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Educational Studies Association*, November 2, 2019, Baltimore, MD, United States.

<sup>4</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr. *Democracy in Black* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016), 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> On Jefferson’s “racially qualified egalitarianism,” see Derrick Darby and John Rury, *The Color of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018, especially Chapters 1 and 2).