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EDUCATING FOR THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT

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On 17 June 2021, a group of about a hundred protesters from the Elokapina movement set camp on Mannerheimintie, the main street of Helsinki, a few dozen meters from the House of the Parliament, blocking much of the traffic, and demanding accelerated climate action on part of the Finnish government. (Elokapina describes itself as an independent part of the international Extinction Rebellion movement that started in the United Kingdom in 2018.) After a series of negotiations with the police, a mutually agreed upon relocation of the protest, and eventual return to the original location, the protesters present were carried to cars and jailed by the police on the evening of 20 June. Throughout the weekend, social media filled with reactions to the protesters' actions. While others showed support, many described the protest as useless, harmful, and polarizing, and proposed using force to stop it. The protest and the social media frenzy quickly took over and remained the main news in the country for several days. Government ministers and members of parliament visited the protesters both to listen to their concerns and to argue with them.

Perhaps the immense attention that the protesters' actions managed to garner is somewhat particular to Finland. Camping on a street in protest is less likely to provoke such a reaction in many other countries with much more colourful traditions of protests and civil disobedience. However, the Elokapina protest brings to the foreground many elements of the political and media climate that are hardly limited to a single Finnish case.

The first is that polarized debate on social media is the driving force behind journalistic content. The protest did not cause any major disruption to traffic, despite taking place on a main street: some trams were rerouted (even though the protesters let them through) and cars needed to take alternative routes. What drove the media attention was the immensely polarized discussion that the protest provoked, leading to inexplicably violent visions of what should be done, with one well-known political journalist publicly inquiring whether it would not be illegal for him to drive over the protesters if it's not illegal for them to be on the street. This phenomenon is familiar to us all. Aided by engagement-hungry algorithms, provocations garner attention from all sides – so much so that a reasonably efficient strategy for some politicians has been to cover any massive problem by sparking yet another and even larger controversy. Mostly everyone has been fooled into exacerbating the problem.

The second is that these reactions quickly eclipse any original point or political message. In Finland, while few publicly disagreed with the Elokapina protesters' view concerning the needfulness of stronger climate action, the debate concentrated on the justifiability and legality of the protest. Even some politicians representing the Green party – the party that traditionally advocates for climate action and currently holds the post of Minister of Climate and Environment, making the party a target of the protest – argued that the protesters should be forcibly removed from blocking public transportation. Following the protesters' refusal to follow police instructions to relocate, many held that such civil disobedience is needless or even harmful in a free, democratic, rule-of-law state such as Finland.

Although, as said, local tradition may explain these views, comparisons could be made with some of the reactions to the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in many U.S. cities and over the world in 2020.

Democracy is an experiment. What those words tend to be taken to mean is that it may fail – that our democratic institutions are precarious and vulnerable. What we often forget is that democracy is also an experiment from within, a call to experiment and revise. Pragmatism as a political philosophy – largely inspired by John Dewey's work – resists the identification of democracy with a set of institutions and practices and constitutional rights, or (perhaps a bit more sophisticatedly) with a fixed interpretation of their contents. It reminds us that democracy is never finished. In this, democracy is united with another grand project, science. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the original contribution of pragmatism to political philosophy is its view of democracy as (a form of) *social inquiry*. Not only are public policies understood as hypotheses, but the methods of this inquiry are themselves open to revision – just as in science in general. This experimental process requires pluralism, or tolerance towards alternative views and proposals concerning the ways in which public policy is to be devised.[1]

This pragmatist perspective helps us to keep our ideas and ideals of democracy sufficiently unfixed to attempt to meet the challenges we face. Firstly, some of democracy's current ills may result from too fixed views of its *actual* practices. This is the case particularly in education. Educators have certainly realized that online discussions and unreliable sources such as YouTube videos have become a major influence on the political opinion of many (although especially those who currently have little access to educational institutions, such as the elderly). Nevertheless, what educators on all levels may often end up teaching is drawn from the old world, where the reliable sources are books and quality newspapers, and the political process is conducted by way of candidacy, platforms, speeches and votes. While citizens require education concerning formal democratic institutions, we need to take a much closer look on how to teach both children and adults to participate in the political practices of the new world of social media, algorithms, and rapidly evolving public discourse, and to *change* those new practices for the better.

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[1] I have argued that pragmatism should be kept distinct from Rawlsian and Habermasian ideals of a "deliberative" democracy that take agreement (under some actual and ideal conditions) to be the aim of the democratic process (Rydenfelt 2011a; 2013; 2019b; 2019c; 2021). The pragmatist vision I've attempted to articulate depends on the possibility of a *normative science*, that is, a scientific study of what *should* be, a notion that both C. S. Peirce and Dewey advanced in different ways (Rydenfelt 2011b; 2015a; 2015b; 2019a). For discussion on the issue of pluralism (and its implications in the philosophy of education), see Bernstein (1987), Talisse & Aikin (2005), Bernstein (2015) and Rydenfelt (2020).

The Finnish case shows that the issue extends to all levels of education. Following the Elokapina protest, the largest national daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, interviewed three legal experts who all agreed that the protesters' actions were well within their constitutional rights.[2] Two of the experts wished not to be named in the news story. This is problematic as journalism. Are experts really experts if they remain anonymous? But the case brings to light an even deeper issue. If researchers refuse to be named in the media – presumably in the fear of excessive and even threatening feedback on social media – universities are failing to provide the support and education that current and future generations of experts require to participate in public discussion as it stands today.

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[2] https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008069148.html.

The second source of democracy's ills may be too fixed views of its *ideal* practices. Consult any international comparison concerning free speech, corruption, political violence, literacy, even happiness, Finland looks to be an exemplary democracy. But considered from the perspective of the country's prospects in meeting the needs of current and future generations under the spectre of the major environmental crises that we are facing, the democratic steps taken so far are hardly sufficient. Instead of concentrating on the legality of the protesters' actions – symptomatic of the Finnish discussion – educators should consider and discuss the broader political and philosophical message of such movements that can reveal that our democratic ideals – by way of both policy and process – are insufficient and require revision.

Keeping our democratic ideals unfixed comes with a price. It means that we often cannot dismiss the practices and actions of others as simply undemocratic. As a poignant case of this sort, we should resist categorically writing off events like those that take place in the U.S. Capitol on 6th January 2021 as being *against* democracy. This is not only to say that among the protesters that day there were those who had been convinced, by a democratically elected president, that a presidential election was rigged and stolen – although, of course, the democratic institutions in place had shown that this was not the case. Reflection, discussion and debate is required to explicate *why* these events were hostile to democracy rather than attempts to draw attention to the problems of the democratic process. Indeed, without a closer inspection we cannot be sure whether some of the protesters acted in the interest of democracy. For example, were some of the people present in protest against the media system, including both legacy and social media, that produces increasing polarization of political opinion while retaining political power in the same hands election after election? Did some of the protesters really advance different democratic ideals, such as alternative ways of electing the leadership of the country by a popular vote? If we suspect that the answer might be in the affirmative, we should discuss the merits and problems of those ideals. This is an immense task for educators, researchers and experts from different fields, one that requires deep commitment to learning and to pluralism. But it may need to be undertaken to keep the experiment alive.

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