

JOHN DEWEY SOCIETY 2015 SYMPOSIUM
THE LEGACY OF MAXINE GREENE: CRITICAL ENGAGEMENTS
WITH HER PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

MAXINE GREENE ON PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION:
TOWARD A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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I have been reading and teaching Maxine Greene's work for many years. I began teaching philosophy and education classes forty years ago as a doctoral student and have used a Maxine Greene text in every one. I've used *The Public School and the Private Vision* (1965), *Teacher as Stranger* (1973), *Landscapes of Learning* (1978), *Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), *Releasing the Imagination* (2000), *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (2001), and many other chapters, articles, and essays.¹ I've had several opportunities to write about her work, her standing within the philosophy of education community, and her influence on me as a teacher, colleague, and friend. In every instance, I drew a connection between Maxine Greene and John Dewey. For example, in Bill Pinar's *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene* (1998), I suggested that the work of Maxine stands out as the most original and compelling response in the latter half of the twentieth century to the fundamental problem of twentieth century educational theory—the problematic relationship between the school and the conscious quest for a public education. Just as Dewey's work in the first half of the twentieth century tried to address the question “Can schools educate?” in an analysis of the kinds and qualities of interactions across a wide range of social arrangements, Greene in the second half of the twentieth century locates this question in the tension between the analytic and the aesthetic, the treatise and the novel, the center and the margins, and systematic philosophy and imaginative literature.² In Robert Lake's *Dear Maxine: Letters from an Unfinished Conversation* (2010), I wrote about how Maxine, as a scholar and as a person, taught me what Dewey meant when he wrote that education is learning to become human. Like Dewey, Maxine taught us that reflective thinking is not about some epistemological correspondence or even coherence between our minds and the given world, but rather about the re-reading of texts from our own vantage points such that the world is a contested, delirious text that is always being re-written and newly read.³ And in a special issue of the *Journal of Educational Controversy* (2010) devoted to her work, I wrote again about the resonances between Maxine and Dewey, not simply in their philosophical views, but perhaps more importantly on their insistence that choosing to wander, instead of seeking solace in some promised land, and insisting on being “not yet” are essential conditions of a living freedom.⁴

Of course all of these parallels and resonances between Maxine Greene and John Dewey can be examined within a larger context of the relationship between Greene and progressive educational thought. We know Maxine considered herself a Deweyan in broad outline. John Dewey is the single most often cited scholar in her work. We also know that Maxine considered herself part of the progressive educational tradition. I intentionally use a lowercase “p” here to refer to the broad historical progressive education tradition that Lawrence Cremin writes about in *The Transformation of the School*.⁵ This needs to be distinguished from the capital “P” and more specific Progressive Education tradition that arose in the early years of the twentieth century as a distinctive and complicated educational ideology that eventually became instantiated in graduate preparation programs, professional and scholarly associations such as the John Dewey Society, and academic journals and publications. Maxine’s relationship with that specific tradition is more ambivalent and nuanced. It seems especially relevant to talk about this relationship at a John Dewey Society meeting. Thus, part of my remarks will be focused on an all-too-brief overview of some of Maxine’s published remarks on Progressive Education.

In addition, I hope to bring something new to our conversation today on this same topic. As many of you know, in the mid-1930s and early 1940s, the left or radical or social reconstructionist wing of the Progressive Education movement came together around the idea of an educational or social frontier. W. H. Kilpatrick’s text on the *Educational Frontier*⁶ was part of this, as were George S. Count’s analyses of Chicago schools and schools boards, eventually culminating in the speeches to the Progressive Education Association gathered under the title, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*⁷ In 1934, under Count’s editorship and with an editorial board of all of the leading progressive educators of the time, a new journal, *The Social Frontier*, was launched. There is a body of scholarly literature on this journal so I will not rehearse the history of its rise and fall. Suffice it to say that the journal was short-lived and its contents, including seminal articles from the most important political and educational thinkers of the time, became very hard to access for later students and scholars of educational theory. Many years later in the 1980s and 1990s, I was asked to edit a book of readings on *The Social Frontier*. The idea was to reprint a substantial number of articles on core issues debated in the journal, each followed by a retrospective-prospective response from a contemporary scholar. I made a very good start on this project at that time, but for many reasons, including untimely deaths, unmet obligations, and the march of time, the edited book was never completed. But some of the scholars invited to contribute chapters kept their promises. Maxine Greene was one of them. I sent Maxine a list of 10–15 articles and essays from *The Social Frontier*⁸ and asked her to write a retrospective-prospective essay some fifty years after these articles were originally published for the chapter entitled “Liberalism and Beyond: Toward a Public Philosophy of Education.” She wrote that essay. When it became clear that the edited book was not going to be

published, I apologized and asked her what she wanted me to do with the chapter. She told me to keep it and maybe we would use it for some project “in the future.” As I was cleaning out my files in anticipation of retirement this year, I found that unpublished essay from Maxine Greene reflecting on *The Social Frontier*, liberalism, and public philosophy. I am quite sure it is unpublished and was known only to the two of us. And now only one. I also have contemporaneous correspondence from her as she was thinking about and writing the essay. These are personal letters between Maxine and me, so again, they are unpublished and unknown by anyone except me. I think it’s important to make these materials public. In this essay, I will base the majority of my remarks on Maxine Greene, liberalism, Progressive Education, and Greene’s unpublished essay and her correspondence to me while it was in preparation. My aim is to sketch the arc of thought on a central theme in Maxine’s work by beginning with her stance on Progressive Education in three of her own texts; shifting to her reading of a select set of materials on progressivism, liberalism, and social philosophy in the influential, but neglected, journal *The Social Frontier*, and reflections on our personal correspondence concerning the revisions necessary to bring the *Frontier* arguments into the 1980s; and finally concluding with discussion of her unpublished essay on liberalism and public philosophy of education.

MAXINE GREENE ON PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

As previously mentioned, Maxine Greene had an ambivalent relationship with the core ideas of Progressive Education and Dewey’s philosophical stance. There is evidence of this complimentary yet critical relationship from early works such as *The Public School and the Private Vision* (1965) to *Landscapes of Learning* (1978) to *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988).

Maxine Greene’s complicated relationship with John Dewey, Progressivism, and Progressive Education can be traced to her earliest work. In *The Public School and the Private Vision*, she writes of Progressivism as a “recreation of the Enlightenment,” an idea of progress grounded not in some faith of a heavenly city, but instead in an experiment based in social inquiry and intentional design, with public education at its core. For Greene, however, the banality of everyday life and inertia of existing institutions crippled Progressive Education from the start. She writes, “The Progressive era was too brief for the remaking the schools would have to undergo to become ‘Progressive’ schools; and once World War I began, it became questionable whether Progressivism in its original sense would ever be relevant again.”⁹ In a fascinating analysis, Greene links Dewey’s particular individual history to the story of public education and “the tragedy of the common school.”¹⁰ For Greene, everything in Dewey’s biography, place in history, and intellectual development led him toward the impulse to “resolve” dualities, tensions, differences, and conflicts. As she writes, for Dewey, “the primary objective of inquiry had to be the creation

of resolutions, the release of tensions, the reconciliation of the conflicts that blocked and obscured practice in the public schools.”¹¹ For Greene, Dewey’s great achievement was integrating and reconciling the multiple strains of Progressive thought. However, at the same time it is clear that these resolutions were hold-overs from an earlier time, a time when “confidence in intelligence was so extreme that men really believed in a future that would be democratic, wholly civilized—a fulfillment, at last, of the Dream.”¹² The point of *The Public School and the Private Vision* is to throw these public, pious dreams into tension with the “private” worries of imaginative writers. Greene writes of Dewey’s contemporaries such as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Randolph Bourne, T. S. Eliot, and others who doubted that the scientific method and cooperative intelligence could resolve the essential tensions and what “resolution” actually meant in an era marked by the domination of mass culture and corporate power. For Maxine, the hope in Dewey’s thought experiment of a democratic education gave way to the mundane administration of a system of schools and “the existential innerness which escapes all formulas and sermons and cannot be realized by any public Dream.”¹³ She writes, “the loftiest dream—even a dream of enlightenment—is susceptible of contamination, that ideals are always invisibly eroded by the fallibility of men. The common schools must leave . . . innocence behind. The Dream may be maintained if we can define wider and more inclusive meanings, less over weening goals.”¹⁴

This critical stance is continued in *Landscapes of Learning*, where her criticism of Dewey was based largely on “his sustained belief that the phenomena he was describing could, in the long run, be dealt with by means of experimental intelligence” and “his undying faith in cooperative intelligence, articulateness, and the scientific method.” For Greene, this faith blinded Dewey to “distortions of communication” and “the impact of technology on human consciousness.”¹⁵ For Greene, the faith in the power of the common or public school to cure fundamental social ills found from Mann to Dewey to Counts, “permitted people to deny the exclusion and suffering of minority groups, as it perpetuated their ‘invisibility.’”¹⁶ And although Dewey considered knowing as critical reflection on lived social experience, his view “is not to be confused with praxis,” which “involves critical reflection—and action upon—a situation” and “a transformation of that situation to the end of overcoming oppressiveness and domination.”¹⁷ For Greene, a form of schooling intended to build a new social order must include the long march through the institutions, but also “an emphasis on conscientization . . . by persons who are situated in the concreteness of the world” and “equipped for interrogation, for problematization, and for hermeneutic interpretation of the culture.”¹⁸ In *Landscapes of Learning*, Greene argues that inquiry from the center, whether in Horace Mann, Dewey, or radical critics such as Counts or Bowles and Gintis, marginalizes singularity and difference. In her view, “the past is multivocal . . . there are and have always been diverse perspectives on the valuable and real” and we can no longer look through

a single perspective.¹⁹ In short, we can no longer assume that the proper function of the school is (or was) as the reformers identified it. Experimental intelligence and the scientific method are not enough. A truly progressive educational theory and progressive social philosophy that seeks to become a form of transformative praxis must address the power of multiple perspectives, link changes in conditions to changes in consciousness, and make imagining a future or sequel as important as analyzing a past. For Greene, Dewey's Great Community must be re-imagined. While Dewey rightly focused on the need for communication, participation, and association, Greene reminds us in the 1970s that an authentic community demands equal attention to the inviolability of individuals, "their integrity as human beings," and that "individuality must be cherished as justice is pursued."²⁰

In *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), Greene further develops this criticism of Deweyan progressive education from a distinctive position within the tradition. While Dewey and other progressives and progressive educators "believed they could devise a mode of social inquiry inextricably linked to the commitment to democratic norms and values . . . critical thinking, hypothetical inquiry, [and] the open exchange of ideas,"²¹ what was overlooked was the sense in which a free society (and its citizens) are morally endangered by unacknowledged mastery, by dominations of every kind felt in "the pervasive and palpable reality of everyday life." She writes, "our knowledge is . . . always insufficient; . . . the moral complexities of what is done are often impenetrable . . . since we only partially understand our own motives and intentions, no matter how critically self-reflective we try to be."²² For Greene, "when we think of the hopes as well as the blindness of the Progressive Era, of the fundamental unpredictability of a society or a world over which so many thought they had gained control, we cannot be surprised to recall the withering of the utopian vision" as Americans had to "confront the irrelevance of their traditional hopes and pieties."²³ While Greene calls *The Social Frontier* a "brief resurgence of utopianism," this hope would also soon fade in mobilization for war, post-war Pax Americana, and the institutionalization of the military-industrial-educational complex. *The Social Frontier* was forced to suspend operations, the Progressive Education Association became an irrelevant shadow of its former self, radicals were hounded out of universities and schools, and John Dewey was relegated to the dustbin of history. For Greene, all of this signals the "transformation of what was once thought to be a beneficent social intelligence into 'instrumental rationality' or what Jürgen Habermas has moved us to call action 'governed by technical rules based on empirical knowledge.'"²⁴ What is left? For Greene, critical social thought in these times requires a radical perspective, from the margin, not the center, and from difference, not the common. Her aim in *The Dialectic of Freedom* is to "consider some of the predicaments and life stories of persons who could never take freedom for granted in this country: women, members of minority groups, immigrants, newcomers We are going to engage with them, not

from the vantage point of society or the system or the cosmos, but . . . from their vantage points as actors, agents in an unpredictable world.”²⁵

Thus, Maxine Greene had a long and complicated intellectual relationship with John Dewey, Progressivism, and Progressive Education, all from a critical position within the tradition. This very brief overview is intended to provide some historical and theoretical context for the next step in the arc of inquiry leading to her 1984 unpublished essay, “Liberalism and Beyond: Toward a Public Philosophy of Education.”

MAXINE GREENE ON *THE SOCIAL FRONTIER*

Perhaps it’s best to begin with a letter I received from her dated July 24, 1983,²⁶ after she had read *The Social Frontier* materials I sent her and had thought about her essay. The letter beautifully expresses both her sense of membership within the progressive educational tradition as well as a critical and ambivalent stance toward core elements of the tradition.

She writes, “1/ There is something so vitalizing in seeing philosophy done with respect to real issues. 2/ There is something so immediately relevant in the discussions of liberalism and social control—on distribution of powers and liberties, on who controls, especially now that what looks like a *laissez-faire* ideology is back—now used to cover over exactly the redistribution Dewey had in mind.”

While locating herself in the broad tradition that links philosophy to real human concerns and to the stream of public philosophy that links liberalism to issues of power, control, liberty, and inequality, Maxine goes on to mark the historical and social changes that demand a rethinking of these progressive arguments.

3/ The arguments over technology, Marxism, and class consciousness would be revised because of what has happened since ‘38: the recognition of the self-augmenting power of “technique”; the subordination (too often) of the scientific by the technical; the development of media and an information complex-unanticipated by the frontiersmen; the lack of a class-conscious “working-class”; the lack of a “comprehensive” sense of social interest.

Given these changes, Maxine describes what is needed to go beyond liberalism toward a public philosophy of education.

4/ I will want to talk about—given the effects of “consciousness industry” (media, et al.), given the technological “revolution,” given the corruption of moral discourse, given the growing critique of large-scale bureaucratization, et al., given the attempt to “use” schooling for national “interest” or “defense”; given the application of ancient *laissez-faire* notions to education (“merit-pay” as incentives; no federal interest; emphasis on “effectiveness” in individual schools; rationalization of lack of funds)—the need

to reconstitute the public sphere in which the necessary changes may be brought about. This is one way of talking about liberal education—the release of people for critical reflection from their own perspectives—not only on their lived situations, but as the media messages, the official explanations, et al.—and for reconsideration of what ought to be, what situations can be created that are truly emancipatory for people in their pluralities and communities. To speak today as if there were a legitimate choice between a “planned” society and a *laissez-faire* society is simplistic. Dewey was basically right: it is a matter of redistribution of freedom and power. How? Through, in part, the bringing an “in-between,” a “common interest” into being among people empowered to speak with their own voices—about social goods and necessities, about war and peace, about those dimensions of the cultural tradition that make our “world” worth cherishing, worth keeping alive. I’ll want to say something too about the gender gap and about minorities, both neglected by the *Social Frontier*—and about the regenerative effect of providing voices for the long silent . . . the pot is boiling.

This remarkable letter provided an outline for the essay to come. We will turn to that essay now to continue following the arc of inquiry.

MAXINE GREENE: LIBERALISM AND BEYOND: TOWARD A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

As mentioned above, I asked Maxine to read a collection of *Social Frontier* materials on liberalism, social philosophy, and education and write an original essay looking back at the materials in their historical moment and looking forward to their bearing on the development of a contemporary public philosophy of education. Her analysis is sympathetic, yet critical. Thus, while the *Frontier* debates were alive to the social issues of an “age of collectivism,” they showed no interest in the “human condition, or on Being, or on the life of consciousness.”²⁷ The *Frontier* writers believed in a world where open communication and human intelligence could solve the major issues facing human kind, but showed no interest or understanding of the “domination of depersonalized technology . . . the industrialization of the mind . . . or the overwhelming of a potentially articulate public by a mass of job-holders and consumers.” While they discussed civil liberties, there was very little attention to issues of race or gender. For Greene, this was not an artifact of history, but rather a failure to “see the treatment of excluded groups as the test of democratic education’s claims.”

Greene recognized the ideological divisions within the Progressive Education movement. The “romantics” focused on freeing individuals from social constraints. For Greene, “social reconstruction in the *Frontier* sense meant nothing to them; more Emersonian than Deweyan, they thought changes would be brought about

through recognition of the Single One.” In contrast, the “revisionists” came closer to the *Frontier* thinkers, though arguing that class stratification was intentional and determinative in capitalist societies and could only be countered by equally intentional instruction in democratic socialist values.

Moving toward the present and future, Greene notes the importance of social theorists such as Alfred Schutz and the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School who begin with ideas of a constructed social reality. She gives special mention to Paulo Freire and his philosophy grounded in educational and social *praxis*, and other radical critics who have contributed to our understanding of how social and cultural capital and inequality are reproduced and sometimes resisted in schools and other educational institutions. However, despite these more recent developments, Greene notes the silence about “the reemergence of a public in the United States and . . . the importance of recapturing the realm of discourse Sheldon Wolin says has been taken over by the country’s conservatives.” For Greene in 1984, “educational philosophers now live and work at a moment when, as Dewey put it in *The Social Frontier*, the ‘letter’ is destroying the ‘spirit’ of liberalism.” For Dewey, “a new liberalism required radical changes in economic institutions and political arrangements so that social control of forces and agencies socially created may accrue to the liberation of all individuals associated together.”

While Greene believes “Dewey was right,” she also insists that critical thought must respond to lived realities. Writing in 1984, she notes a “world of broken promises and destroyed faiths, a world where tortures continue to be the order of the day . . . where totalitarian thought controls multiply, where wars go on eternally, where multinational corporations extend their influence further and further . . .” All of these, and more, are “indications of the ‘eclipse of the public,’ of a ‘feeling that the space between separate individuals is empty, a kind of void.’” To move ahead, “that space must be recreated” somehow, we must bring into existence an “in-between.” To move toward a public philosophy in days like these is to work toward what was once called *theoria*, meaning a normative conception of a rational and humane society.” And while *The Social Frontier* can teach us, both for what was debated and what was not, “we are not required to go back in time in order to recover what some believe is lost . . . there is no turning back.” The old either-ors such as liberty versus social control must give way to a focus on “the nature of contemporary mystification and domestication . . . in the actualities of lived experience.” For Greene, a public philosophy of education must take biographies, background awareness, interpreted experience and point of view into account. A public philosophy of education must be focused on understanding as a “free act, undertaken by a person as center of consciousness.” Such understanding might make possible articulateness in speech and action and an in-between that is “more significant than a sharing of interest, something that creates a ‘web of relationships.’” For Greene, a new liberalism must develop a “*theoria* oriented to a public space.” Finally, “again, there is no turning back. There is the need to clarify what it signifies to engage in critique, to

pursue freedom, to be with others. And, in the tradition of *The Social Frontier*, to act in concert with others taking part in the ongoing conversation, to live toward open possibility.”

CONCLUSION

I have tried to trace Maxine Greene’s critical and complicated arc of thought on Progressive Education, liberalism, and a public philosophy of education through an examination of her published writing in several books and her unpublished correspondence and writing in response to essays from *The Social Frontier*. I hope his essay will offer a fresh perspective on one of the most important philosophers of education of our time as she thought and wrote about urgent social and educational issues. While important in historical terms, as Maxine tells us, there is no turning back. The issues she identifies, such as the eclipse of the public, technological domination and mystification, corporate hegemony, alienation and anomie, inequality and injustice, never ending war, and others, still, more than ever, set the agenda for authentic and relevant inquiry in educational theory, policy, and practice. We miss our friend and teacher, but she remains an inspiration and source of hope in hard times.

NOTES

1. Maxine Greene, *The Public School and the Private Vision* (New York: Random House, 1965); *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973); *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978); *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988); *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).
2. James M. Giarelli, “Maxine Greene: The Literary Imagination and the Sources of a Public Education,” in *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene: ‘I am . . . Not Yet’*, ed. William Pinar (London: Falmer Press, 1998), 174–78.
3. James M. Giarelli, “Learning Quality and Becoming Human,” in *Dear Maxine: Letters from the Unfinished Conversation*, ed. Robert Lake (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 84–86.
4. James M. Giarelli, “In Honor of Maxine Greene,” *Journal of Educational Controversy* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2010).
5. Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).
6. W. Heard Kilpatrick, *The Educational Frontier* (New York: The Century Co., 1933); F. D. Brooks, ed., *Yearbook XXI of the National Society of College Teachers of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933).
7. George S. Counts, *The Selective Character of American Secondary Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); *The Social Composition of Boards of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927); *School and Society in Chicago* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1928), *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1932).

8. All articles are from *The Social Frontier* (1934–1939) and its successor *Frontiers of Democracy* (1939–1943): George S. Counts, (1934); Counts, “Orientation” (editorial, 1934); John Dewey, “Collectivism and Collectivism” (1935); John Dewey, “Liberty and Social Control” (1935); John Dewey, “The Meaning of Liberalism” (1936); John Dewey, “Liberalism and Equality” (1936); Harold Laski, “Liberalism and Civil Liberties” (1936); John Dewey, “A New Education Needs a New World” (1936); John L. Childs, “Class Struggle and the Democratic Way” (1936); John L. Childs, “Democracy, Education, and the Class Struggle” (1936); John Dewey, “Mr. Laski’s Half-Truths” (1937); Norman Thomas, “Education and Social Change” (1938); John Dewey, “Toward the American Commonwealth: Socialism Re-Examined: Its Ends and Means” (1938); John L. Childs, “Education, Democracy, and the Socialized Economy” (1940); John Dewey, “The Meaning of the Term: Experimentalism” (1940); Gordon Allport, “The Meaning of the Term: Liberalism” (1940); Sidney Hook, “Liberalism and the Motives of Men” (1940); Sidney Hook, “Socialism and the Motives of Men” (1940); George S. Counts, “What is Living and What is Dead in Marxism?” (1941); Max Lerner, “A Liberal Looks at Life” (1943); William O. Stanley, “American Liberals—Stand and Fight!” (1943); Theodore Bramfeld, “Free Enterprise in America” (1943); Theodore Bramfeld, “Is the Conservative Right?” (1943).

9. Maxine Greene, *Public School and Private Vision*, 159.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 160.

12. *Ibid.*, 161.

13. *Ibid.*, 164.

14. *Ibid.*, 166.

15. *Landscapes*, 62.

16. *Ibid.*, 91.

17. *Ibid.*, 100.

18. *Ibid.*, 108.

19. *Ibid.*, 117.

20. *Ibid.*, 144.

21. *Dialectic*, 43.

22. *Ibid.*, 46.

23. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

24. *Ibid.*, 54.

25. *Ibid.*, 55.

26. All quotations are from Maxine Greene’s personal correspondence to James Giarelli, July 24, 1983.

27. All quotations are from Maxine Greene, “Liberalism and Beyond: Toward a Public Philosophy of Education,” unpublished manuscript, 1984. The manuscript is unpaginated. Now published in this issue of *Education & Culture*, 41–51.

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