Democratic Education as a Curricular Problem: Historical Consciousness and the Moralizing Limits of the Present (Routledge Cultural Studies in Knowledge, Curriculum, and Education)

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Democratic Education as a Curricular Problem, by Daniel Friedrich, is the first in a Routledge series that looks to critically interrogate current approaches to educational policy, curricular change and teacher education. Friedrich’s contribution is to hold a critical lens to Argentina’s attempts to fashion a new citizenry and democratic conscious through reimagining Argentinean schooling after the ‘last dictatorship’ (1976-1983). This is not simply a case study of national curricular change, however; the particular context of Argentina is used thoughtfully as an exemplar of the ways in which schooling may be used to construct politically desired subjectivities and citizens.

The book has five chapters that take the reader on a fascinating historiographical and theoretical journey as Friedrich draws upon the diverse fields of memory studies, and postmodern and Foucaultian conceptions of ‘nation-ness’, personal agency, governmentalities and the construction of subjectivities. On a national level, Democratic Education as a Curricular Problem provides the Argentinian educational community with prescient opportunities for reflection upon the ways in which discursive practices about the last dictatorship are being mobilised within the current curriculum in order to shape the new ‘responsible’ and ‘democratic’ Argentinian citizen. Of general relevance to all educational researchers, however, is the way Friedrich clearly articulates the schooling mechanisms that are called into action in service to the production of ‘desired’ subjectivities and ‘the education of the citizen is turned into an identity-binding process in which the governance of conduct establishes limits on the present’ (p. 46 – emphasis added). This is the paradox that is the focus of this work: the prescribed narratives of ‘truth’ about the last Argentinian dictatorship and the deployment of clear dichotomies between ‘them’ (dictators) and ‘us’ (current Argentinians/Argentinian students) actually echo the mechanisms of control of the previous regime.

Friedrich makes it absolutely clear that he is not an apologist for the last dictatorship; nor does he accuse current educational practices of being authoritarian. His overarching aim is to make visible the instruments of schooling that use the curriculum for moral and political ends, thereby limiting the critical intellectual work that underpins educational goals. In particular, Friedrich focuses on the ways in which Argentinean schooling currently utilises the concept of ‘historical consciousness’ to develop historical binaries between the democratic present and the authoritarian past in order to mobilise narratives of a progressive morality in the production of Argentina’s future citizens. Drawing upon Rose (1999) and Foucault (1997), Friedrich contends that such historical narratives linking past, present and future, when integrated with notions of the self, work to govern the behaviour of individuals in order to conform to normative understandings of the ‘good citizen’. In sum, he argues that ‘the citizen

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functions within liberal governmetalities as a technology of governance, that ...as an assemblage of techniques, vocabularies, practices of calculation, modes of perception and action, models of authorities, and forms of judgment’ (p. 48) function to produce a ‘preferred’ kind of person; thus, the intrusion of ‘the political’ into the curriculum, however well intended, raises serious questions for educators.

The practice of governing individual subjectivities and thus larger populations through the technology of citizenship mobilised through the organisation of memory is identified by Friedrich as coming dangerously close to the authoritarianism being displaced. He argues that in order to establish the conditions within which democratic agency can flourish, one must destabilise and interrogate the assumptions that lie behind schooling ‘reforms’ and make visible, practices that limit the unique potential of individuals. He points out that ‘many of these efforts to bring about a democratic citizen have embedded in them the very things they are trying to overcome’ (p. 114).

‘Educational reform’ carries the connotation of progress, of making a better world; there are values to which we adhere as a democratic society, which we would like to be carried forward by our children in an effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past. As educators it is tempting therefore to impose ‘consensualized historical narratives’ (p. 31) and summon the past as a pedagogical device for the production of citizenry. Friedrich argues that this burden creates a dilemma for history teachers: rather than engaging in their disciplinary impulse towards ‘dissensus’- constant interrogation of evidence and perspectives – they must instead act as ‘judges’ (p. 44) and advocate ‘truth’ where there should be historical argumentation. It is because all nations are ‘guilty’ of similar processes of curricular and pedagogical containment for the perceived ‘common good’ that Friedrich’s work has significance for educational change. Indeed, one of the queries at the core of this book is whether educators have the courage to allow students to think for themselves.

Friedrich concludes with a thought-provoking proposal that challenges ‘self-evident truths’ of schooling that he argues incorporates: ‘the moral value of thought and reason, the idea that difference can be equated with inequality, that democracy or a democratic education can be achieved via social consensus, that the citizen is made not born’ (p. 120). Friedrich argues that all such pedagogical ‘truths’ are socio-historically contingent, Drawing upon Derrida (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004) he contends that ‘the only possible way in which education can live up to the promises of democracy is through becoming hospitable in its openness to the other … The other is that which is outside our logos [expectations, knowledge], it is that which cannot be grasped, and is therefore incalculable’ (p. 121). Thus, educating for ‘the unknown’ becomes an impossible task; and, according to Friedrich, ‘the reason to educate is to learn to be a ‘traitor to one’s reason, to one’s knowledge, to one’s very self’ (p. 122). An anarchic proposition, perhaps; but one that suggests a paradigm of freedom within schooling processes that reformers can only dream about.

