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the independence of education

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How should teachers react when a 'populist' or nationalist politician, someone with illiberal or authoritarian tendencies, comes to power in a formally legitimate election? This question has rarely been discussed directly in Anglo-American political philosophy, but has been present in German educational discourse.

How should teachers react when a 'populist' or nationalist politician, someone with illiberal or authoritarian tendencies, comes to power in a formally legitimate election? This question has rarely been discussed directly in Anglo-American political philosophy, but has been present in German educational discourse. The American debate has focussed, especially under the influence of John Rawls' Political Liberalism (1993), on the question of what kinds of restrictions the liberal state can legitimately impose on its citizens, in the sphere of education: One of Rawls' main ideas is that the state is not authorized to promote any set of 'comprehensive' (e.g., religious or ethical) values in education. This includes liberal values such as individual self-realization and autonomy. In Rawls' account, however, the state is allowed to impose basic political principles on both the public and the private sector of the education system. With regard to the role of teachers, this means at least that their teaching must be compatible with certain basic principles, and cannot – for instance – legitimately promote racism. In state schools, teachers should also refrain from privileging one particular comprehensive view over others, that is, they should remain 'neutral' with regard to competing ethical and religious views. It seems natural to add that regarding political issues, teachers should not promote one particular partisan or ideological view.

This debate is primarily about citizens with illiberal attitudes and the ways that they might or might not be constrained by the liberal state. But what if political power itself (especially executive power) is in the hands of a person or party with illiberal, authoritarian views or impulses? This question arises in the face of recent political developments in Western democracies, especially in the United States. Donald Trump rallies his supporters with racist themes, attacks the judiciary system and the media, and shows an extreme form of disregard for facts, attempting to set up an 'alternative reality'.

In German educational thought, there is a longstanding debate as to the relationship between education and political power. The guiding idea is that education should, in some sense or other, be independent from state power. A radical account of the independence of education was developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1980). In an early work on the outlines of the liberal state, Humboldt claimed that education should not be under state control. He thought that the state would inevitably use the education system for its own purposes, and try to create useful citizens, instead of promoting 'humanity'. In this context, Humboldt introduced his idea of Bildung as individual self-realization. He thought that state interference – and an education for citizenship – necessarily undermines the

Bildung of the human being. He thus conceived of education as a 'private', not a 'public' endeavour. In this regard, his ideas resemble libertarian views of education. This aspect of Humboldt's thought was mostly neglected in the second half of the 20th century, when his ideas were taken up by educational theorists (e.g., Benner, 1997; see also Benner & Stepkowski, 2011). Humboldt's notion of the independence of education seemed attractive in the face of the German experiences with two different totalitarian states.

Humboldt conceived of the independence of education in a purely negative sense: The state should not interfere with education. It seems clear, however, that the liberal state must actively establish and maintain an independent education system. It must provide the financial resources for schools, in order to ensure that all young people have access to a decent education, especially members of socially disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the state must regulate the school system, committing it to educational aims that reflect liberal-democratic principles. Otherwise, many schools might restrict themselves to the promotion of economically useful capacities, or endorse fundamentalist religious views that are incompatible with basic liberal principles. It is illusionary to think that non-interference will foster Bildung (as self-realization). It should also be noted here that Rawlsian political liberals hold the view that Humboldt's ideal of Bildung expresses a particular comprehensive view that should not guide education policy in the liberal democracy.

The negative understanding of educational independence (as non-interference) thus presupposes a positive account of what the state should do to set up an independent education system. The demand for independence has two kinds of addressees. For one, it directs those in political power not to intervene into the education system in inappropriate ways, that is, in ways incompatible with the liberal-democratic educational agenda. They should not attempt to force their personal or partisan priorities on the education system. Moreover, they should not try to dismantle the education system as an independent entity in the liberal order, for instance, by de-funding it. The demand for independence also addresses educational agents themselves, that is, those who work within the education system (e.g. teachers or principals). They are demanded to remain independent, in the sense that they should consistently pursue liberal-democratic educational aims. They should push back against political pressure to do otherwise, and should not obey political power in advance, that is, without being forced to do so (Snyder, 2017).

I would like to spell this out by focussing on one issue that is receiving broad attention in the era of Trump, but has not been widely discussed in liberal political and educational philosophy – the issue of truth (Peters, 2017). The constant flow of falsehoods coming from Trump and those around him might be explained by referring to Trump's specific personality traits and his life-long habits of bragging, lying and cheating. However, manipulative propaganda strategies have long been part of the authoritarian playbook (Snyder, 2017).

No matter how we conceive of the core features of liberal-democratic education in detail, it seems clear that it must, in some sense or other, be oriented towards truth and rational discourse. Here, the moral issue might be distinguished from epistemological considerations. As to the latter, it has often been doubted that it is possible to grasp the 'truth' or the 'facts' in a reliable or 'objective' way. Some have taken it for granted that our knowledge about the world is (socially) constructed, and that the idea of truth has lost its point. In the face of a president making claims that are obviously false (e.g., regarding his inauguration crowd, that according to him was the largest ever), this question needs to be re-considered. Even from a constructionist (or 'post-structuralist') standpoint, Trump's statement regarding the number of people at the inauguration might be criticised as driven by power interests.

Clearly, Trump tries to use his position of power to create a view of reality that suits him. Apart from this critical stance, it also seems necessary to develop a positive understanding of what it means that the 'facts' speak against Trump's statement: It is simply not 'true' that more people attended his inauguration than the inauguration of President Obama.

Given that Trump sees this himself, and therefore knows what the facts are, his statement is a form of intentional deception or manipulation. This leads us to the moral issue: Lying, as it is commonly understood, entails an acknowledgement of the truth, and the intention to deceive others about it. In the case of the inauguration crowd, it may well be that Trump tried or still tries to manipulate people's views (or even perceptions) on the number of people present. More importantly, telling obvious falsehoods may be seen as a demonstration of power. Those around Trump have to pretend that they believe his lies, and they are even expected to go out and defend them.

A commitment to the truth seems inherent to liberal-democratic education – some would say, to education as such. First, there is a moral obligation not to deceive (manipulate, indoctrinate) learners. This means, for one thing, that teachers should tell learners the truth, or at least what they think is the truth. It also means that educators should not use manipulative methods to force certain beliefs on learners. They should address learners as rational persons – that is, as persons capable of understanding and responding to reasons. These demands might be rooted in a principle of respect for the learners as persons.

Second, educators in a liberal democracy should initiate learners into practices of truth-seeking and discursive argument. The idea is that teachers might not always know what 'the truth' is, but can support learners in developing the rational competencies necessary to critically examine what is presented to them as a 'fact'. There is an ongoing debate, in this regard, as to the role of religious beliefs and the natural sciences in education. Apart from this controversy, we can safely state that young persons should be enabled to evaluate fact-oriented claims in the political field, that is, claims relevant for political decision-making. Having this capacity can be seen as a precondition for independent and competent democratic participation.

Third, young citizens should themselves develop a commitment to the truth. This not only means that citizens should not deceive others in political discourse (e.g., by intentionally spreading 'fake news'). It also means that they should take responsibility for what they say, in the sense that they should be ready to provide reasons for their statements, if these are rationally challenged. Also, they should modify their views if they cannot bring forward sound evidence in support of them.

In these various ways, then, a commitment to the truth can be seen as constitutive for (liberal-democratic) education. While authoritarian leaders typically force their own untruthful accounts of reality on the education system, democratically elected politicians should not even attempt to do so, but respect the independence of education in this regard. Educational agents should abide by their commitment to the truth, and resist political pressure. Also – related the first point mentioned above – they should not mimic the manipulative strategies used by politicians with authoritarian tendencies. As to the second point, initiating students into discursive practices will unavoidably involve the discussion of public issues and political events. This means that false statements made by a president or a party leader will be discussed critically in class. Rational discussions in school must be 'open', in the sense that all kinds of views may be aired, and that teachers may not speak the final word in the debate. This is especially important regarding the fact that some of the students themselves might be supporters of political figures with illiberal tendencies. These students should

have the opportunity to articulate their views. They should even be encouraged to do so. Clearly, however, they should be held accountable for what they say, and be pressed for justification. This type of educational discourse may promote an understanding of the possibly legitimate concerns that underly populist and nationalist politics.

At the same time, it can be justified to exclude certain issues from open debate. Persons articulating racist or sexist views might legitimately be 'silenced', as they may insult or even directly assault other students in class, namely women or non-white students. Teachers also have a duty to debunk certain obviously false claims that are made publicly by powerful politicians. An example would be the so-called `birther conspiracy´ theory according to which Barack Obama was not born in the United States. Since there is no evidence whatsoever to support this claim, there is no reason to discuss it openly. By merely opening up the debate on birtherism, teachers would play into the hands of conspiracy theorists like Donald Trump. These people often promote their theories not by defending them directly, but by raising doubts about the 'mainstream view' of things. In this sense, then, political propaganda does not have to commit to certain views. Racist or sexist views can be spread without directly endorsing or defending them. Trump never takes responsibility for what he says. He does not provide evidence, and does not back off from his claims in the face of evidence. He repeats his lies, or lies about his earlier lies ('I didn't say that'). In this regard, then, Trump might serve as a 'negative role model' in civic education. He behaves as no politician – and no citizen – should ever behave.

I started with the question of how teachers should react to the rise of politicians like Trump who celebrate their opposition to the liberal mainstream, and do not hide their authoritarian impulses. The problem of course, is that teachers' opposition to populist leaders might be seen as a purely partisan endeavour that is incompatible with the demand for ideological neutrality. Clearly, this is how the supporters of populists will frame it. Teachers – just like the judges or journalists who are attacked by Trump – will have to live with this. In this essay, I have brought up the notion of the independence of education that relies on some conception of the core of liberal-democratic education. I have argued that among the core features of such an education is a commitment to the truth. As teachers should be committed to the truth and to rational discourse, they should oppose politicians who disregard rational argument and intentionally spread all kinds of falsehoods. They should enable and encourage their students to think critically, and to question what politicians, populist or not, say and do.

The demand for educational independence might be justified in two related ways. For one, by acting independently, teachers protect and stabilize the liberal-democratic order in the face of (quasi-)authoritarian threats. In this sense, the education system has a specific political function, similar to the function of the judiciary system, or the media. Both these entities are typically ascribed some sort of 'independence' in the political order. The independence of teachers might also be justified by focussing on their responsibility for their students: In defending their own independence, teachers protect students from being manipulated and instrumentalised by political power. They ensure that these students learn to think for themselves, and become independent citizens who can competently and responsibly take part in political decision-making.

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