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# reply: education and politics: a reply to Su and Su

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In their article, “Why solving intergenerational injustice through education does not work,” Hanno Su and Shia Su present at least two claims. The first claim is that the fact of climate change refutes the “progressive” bias in modern educational thought and shifts the task of education away from preparing children for a better future to preparing them for what will likely be a worse future.

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In their article, “Why solving intergenerational injustice through education does not work,” Hanno Su and Shia Su present at least two claims. The first claim is that the fact of climate change refutes the “progressive” bias in modern educational thought and shifts the task of education away from preparing children for a better future to preparing them for what will likely be a worse future. The second claim is that the present adult generation must respond to climate change, not by resolving to educate the younger generation into “better” habits and values, but by assuming responsibility for our part in the crisis, doing as much as possible, as soon as possible, to mitigate its long-term effects. My commentary responds to these two claims. I judge that, while Su and Su are correct to stress the present generation’s imperative to “assume responsibility” for the climate crisis, their deflationary account of education’s political function gives short shrift to how education can supplement and secure revolutionary change.

Su and Su argue that the fact of climate change presents a conceptual challenge for any progressivist educational framework that expects the future will be better than the present. Many modern educational thinkers have presupposed the intergenerational progress of the species and placed their hopes for a more just and intelligent humanity in future generations. According to Su and Su, however, the fact of climate change refutes this basic tenet of educational progressivism, for “it is relatively safe to assume,” given recent climate projections, that “our children will not have a better life than we did” (Su and Su, 2019, p. 1). For the authors, this means that the whole question of intergenerational climate justice, as well as education’s part in realizing that justice, has to be reframed (ibid). If the Anthropocene is not an age of progress, then education should not pretend to be an agent of progress, but instead should prepare children to face a crisis-ridden future that is likely going to be much worse than the present.

By “worse,” I take it, Su and Su refer to the long-term negative effects of climate change on Earth’s habitability for human beings: air and water pollution, extreme weather patterns, mass extinctions, and so on. Moreover, “worse” seems to refer to the social and political crises that will undoubtedly attend these ecological crises: mass displacement and migration, destabilized food systems, internecine conflict, and more. The authors are correct to treat these imminent ecological and political crises as grave challenges. Still, I do not understand how it follows that our educational

response to these challenges should be to prepare children to inhabit a world that is judged in advance to be "worse" than our own. My worry is that, by judging the future world as "worse" in both an ecological and political sense, we make the same error that the authors attribute to educational progressivism, namely, that it precludes future generations from rendering their own judgments and finding their own orientations within their common world. "If we impose upon young minds our utopian version of a better life – even with our best intentions–," the authors write, "we also undermine their chances of a life of their own" (ibid, p. 4). But do we treat younger generations any differently if we impose upon them a quasi-*dystopian* vision of the *worse* life that awaits them? I fail to see how we do.

Su and Su's objection to educational progressivism goes well beyond its tenuous relationship to climate change. On their view, educational progressivism would be an untenable program, with or without the fact of climate change, on account of its political utopianism. The right kind of forward-lookingness is not utopianism, but what they call a "a parental act of assuming responsibility" for how our actions affect the quality of life of future generations. For Su and Su, it is more important for adults to assume responsibility for climate change than to change how we educate children to cope with it. To prioritize education over changing ourselves would be to ask future generations to solve our own crisis for us. By trying to use education "as a starting point for societal change" (Su and Su, p. 3), progressivism fails to distinguish meaningfully between the responsibilities of adults and children.[1]

Su and Su's account of the "forward-looking, parental act of assuming responsibility" draws heavily from Hannah Arendt. Arendt's critique of progressive education picks out two issues among others: (1) the relationship between education and political life and (2) the relationship between adults and children. Arendt categorically denies that education has any part to play in politics, "because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated," i.e., adults (Arendt, 1954, p. 3). Adults cannot be educated, she says, because pedagogical authority, an essential element of any education, has no place in the "world of equals" where politics gets done. Children, then, are the only rightful recipients of education, and as long as they remain dependent upon their elders to teach them about the world, they should not be doing politics. But this is just what progressive education asks them to do: it asks children, *while they are still children*, before they can live and reason and make sound judgments on their own, to bring a new and better common world into being. Therefore, we must "decisively divorce the realm of education…from the realm of public, political life" (ibid, p. 13).

Arendt's, and by extension, Su and Su's, position might be called, in contrast to educational progressivism, *educational conservatism*.[2] Such a view seeks to divorce the legitimate pedagogical authority of parents and educators from the political domain (where no such authority exists, nor has a right to exist, due to the fact that everyone in the political domain counts as equal). Moreover, it seeks to conceal children from politics until they are ready, both emotionally and rationally, for the task of renewing the old world into which they were born. By so doing, it avoids the harm of "strik[ing] from [children's] hands their chance of undertaking…something unforeseen by us" (ibid, p. 14).[3] The litmus test of a valid revolution, if I understand Arendt correctly, is its ability to keep politics out of education in moments of crisis. Tempting as it would be to reconstruct the entire system of education completely from scratch, in view of some revolutionary vision of a better society, it is wrong to do so. I take it that Su and Su try to apply this Arendtian insight to the climate crisis. Essentially, they argue that we must be *political revolutionaries* and *educational conservatives* at the same time.

As attractive as this formulation is, I am not ready to accept it, largely because I do not think it squares with a radical democratic vision of politics, which, if I may stipulate briefly here, *requires* that education serve a political function, not just for children, but for adults as well. Where children are concerned, the democratic public school is supposed to furnish the transitional space from the world of the home to the world of politics, in the best examples providing children a guided setting where they can reconcile the contradictions between their private and public lives.[4] But democracy cannot merely be concerned with the education of children. Because it aims to establish and sustain the broadest measure of justice for all in a non-ideal world, democracy must be concerned with the ongoing political development of adults, even after they have graduated into the world of equals. Contrary to Arendt, I do not think it is inherently tyrannical or coercive to speak of educating adults, so long as we are talking about *self-education*. Indeed, it is part of democracy's concept that the exercise of political control should have an educative effect on the body politic over time. As W.E.B. Du Bois summarily puts it: "Education is not a prerequisite to political control, [but] political control is the cause of popular education" (Du Bois, 2016, p. 81). In a democracy, where the main levers of state and economy are moved by the people, the people assume responsibility for their collective political judgments and try to improve on them intergenerationally. "A given people today may not be intelligent," Du Bois observes, "but through a democratic government…, they can educate, not only the individual unit, but generation after generation, until they accumulate vast stores of wisdom" (ibid). The results of the people's ongoing political education appear in the discourses, institutions, and education they pass on to future generations. In democratic politics, the pedagogical authority is no one's parent or teacher but the body politic itself, in which all subjects are included and none has more of a say than any other. Democracy does not ask us to separate education from politics, nor deny the possibility of adult education. It aims, on the contrary, to transform politics into self-education and supplements this process with a robust formal schooling program that inculcates the habit of learning over the course of a complete life.

In sum, then, while I agree with the spirit of Su and Su's injunction that adults must assume responsibility for the climate crisis, I am hesitant, as yet, to accept their thesis about the separation of education and politics. I do not yet see why the injunction to assume responsibility demands that we must order our priorities as if we were educational conservatives. Educating with an eye to shaping future society does not *necessarily* let us off the hook from taking immediate measures to transform ourselves. I suspect that only a vigorous and simultaneous combination of educating the young while drastically democratizing our basic political and economic institutions will yield the result Su and Su want: a livable planet that provides the material conditions necessary for future generations to construct their own vital worlds upon the ruins of our own. Developing an ecologically enlightened educational program for future generations must be an integral part of our own transformation.

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1. Hence why the authors quote Greta Thunberg's speech to the United Nations, wherein the fifteen-year-old activist rebukes the adult dignitaries for "acting like children" with regard to the climate crisis.
2. Here, I follow Arendt's distinction between educational conservatism and political conservatism in "The Crisis of Education." While Arendt endorses the former, whose task is to "cherish and protect the child against the world," she rejects the latter for "accept(ing) the world as it is, striving only to preserve the status quo," which, for her, amounts to a denial of the fact of natality. I take it that Su and Su, like Arendt, are educational conservatives but not political conservatives.
3. Interestingly, Arendt judges that non-tyrannical revolutionaries tend to embrace educational conservatism, since their primary concern is with a transformation of the political world. See Arendt, (1954), p. 11.
4. I recognize that this is an extremely high bar to set for actually existing public schools. But my point here is not that actually existing schools do achieve it; it is that democratic justice requires that they try to achieve it.