

four challenges to political autonomy education in contemporary public spheres

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This contribution discusses four challenges to political autonomy education in contemporary public spheres from the perspective of a discourse theory of education. These challenges arise from political, cultural, economic, and technological developments that presently affect the formation of public spheres. These developments are, respectively, the hollowing out of the efficacy and legitimacy of national political deliberation, the so-called singularization of culture, the monopolistic tendencies of the platform economy, and the technologically induced discursive fragmentation. This contribution suggests educational responses to the challenges that are posed by these developments. These responses include, inter alia, transnational democratic conscientization, the humanistic exploration of commonality across cultural difference, role games facilitating socioeconomic education, and the cultivation of digital habits that diversify political experience online.

Keywords: digitization, discourse theory, education for political autonomy, public spheres, transnational democracy

Introduction

The aims of this contribution are to discuss four features of contemporary public spheres within Western societies and to illustrate the ways in which these features pose educational challenges. I will pursue these aims from the point of view of a discourse theory of moral and political education, according to which education requires the development of moral and political autonomy that enables engaging in moral and political discourses (Martin, 2012; Stojanov, 2016; Culp, 2019; 2020). Such a discourse theory of education is particularly interested in the actual and possible shapes of political public spheres, since the realization of political autonomy by way of engaging in political discourses also involves participating within such public spheres. This is because political public spheres are meant to discursively bind the decision-makers to the decision-takers, so that within a representative political system those who are the addressees of laws or policies can also understand themselves as their authors.¹

In the next section I begin by sketching a discourse-theoretical conceptualization of the idea of education before I will then consider four features of contemporary public spheres that challenge the realization of moral and political education so conceived. The four features of the public spheres refer to their political, cultural, economic, and technological aspects. In a nutshell, they are, respectively, the hollowing out of the efficacy and legitimacy of national political deliberation (Fraser, 2014), the so-called singularization of culture (Reckwitz, 2020), the monopolistic tendencies of the platform economy (Staab, 2020), and the technologically induced discursive fragmentation (Sunstein, 2017). Following that, I will identify the educational challenge posed by

each of these four features and suggest ways in which educational policy makers and educators may respond to these challenges.

A discourse-theoretical conceptualization of education and the public sphere

A discourse theory of morality and politics is based on the recognition of human beings as *reasoning beings* that justify their beliefs and actions relative to reasons (Forst, 2012, ch. 1). Thus conceived, the education of human beings consists of an initiation into a space of reasons so that, as educated human beings, they can provide appropriate reasons for their beliefs and actions (Siegel, 2012; Stojanov, 2016). To the extent that human beings can cite appropriate reasons for their beliefs and actions, they are autonomous, and so education mainly means developing one's autonomy. In the practical domain of justifying one's actions, discourse theory relies on Habermas's (1993) differentiation between a pragmatic, moral, and ethical use of practical reason. The pragmatic use is an instrumental use of reason that determines what choice is the best or most rational employment of the available means given an already existing set of ends. By contrast, the ethical and the moral uses of reason refer to the justification of the ends that one ought to pursue. The differentiation between the *ethical* and the *moral* use of reason, in turn, draws on the distinction between the good and the right (also Forst, 2012, ch. 3). Whereas ethical reason involves a reflection on what the good life of an individual or a collective is, moral reason concerns what human beings owe to each other even if they do not share the same understanding of the good life. Education as the development of one's autonomy as a reasoning being thus concerns the formation of three practical employments of reason – its pragmatic, ethical, and moral employment.

On a discourse-theoretical understanding of the *moral* use of practical reason, the justification as to what human beings owe one another must be determined relative to the criteria of generality and reciprocity, as these are the claims of validity that are raised within moral contexts of justification (Forst, 2002, p. 68–69, p. 133–134; 2012, p. 80–81). Simply put, these criteria reflect that when human beings invoke the violation of a moral norm, they claim that this norm could not be *mutually* accepted by *all* human beings. On the discourse-theoretic view, which actions or decisions fail to meet the criteria of generality and reciprocity needs to be determined discursively, that is, within discourses of moral justification. However, since *all* human beings will never participate together in such a discourse of moral justification, moral norms can only be presumptively justified. Thus, all justifications of supposedly valid moral norms must count as fallible and hypothetically justified.

Within political contexts in which the moral justification of political norms is at stake, we can speak of political discourses and public reasoning about principles of justice that determine the rights and liberties of those who are members of a context of justice (Rawls, 1999). It is in such political discourses about principles of justice in which the idea of a public sphere plays a particularly important role, especially under modern conditions in which nation states are central building blocks of political relationships and part and parcel of the modern social imaginary (Eisenstadt, 2000; Taylor, 2002). This is because in modern societies the legal and bureaucratic discourses about the justification and application of the law also take place within formal institutions of the state – the executive, the judicative, and the legislative branches of the government (Günther, 1994; Habermas, 1996). Hence, these discourses are removed from the everyday and civil society conversations and discussions as to which principles of justice are justified. Under such conditions in which the citizens and residents of a state are distant from the

formal decision-making processes and their underlying justificatory discourses, the point of the public sphere is to bridge and connect the formal with the informal political reflections, decisions, and actions (Peters, 2008). The public sphere is thus the space in which a *society-wide* exchange of reasons is supposed to take place (Habermas, 2006). Therefore, the public sphere is meant to be inclusive and deliberative – it is meant to include all members of society and is meant to reflect a form of collective reasoning. Ideally, the institutionalization and practice of such a public sphere expresses political autonomy, as it instantiates a society-wide process of public opinion- and will-formation based on deliberation. Accordingly, given the proposed understanding of education as a process of realizing one’s autonomy as a reasoning being, the formation of those attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are necessary for expressing such political autonomy should be conceived as political education (Culp, 2019, ch. 5).

Education for political autonomy, whether it is pursued by parents, schools, or civil society associations, is presently subject to considerable challenges, however. These educational challenges arise, albeit not exclusively, from four features of contemporary public spheres within Western societies. To clarify, the following list of political, cultural, economic, and technological features of contemporary public spheres and of corresponding challenges of education for political autonomy is not exhaustive. Yet it is sufficiently ample to highlight the ways in which the complexity of contemporary public spheres translates into a diverse and broad set of challenges currently faced by educational policy makers and educators committed to political autonomy as educational ideal.

A political feature of contemporary public spheres

A *political feature* of contemporary public spheres is their national orientation. They are based on a nationally constituted formal political system, they rely on a national political consciousness, and they are anchored in national media systems based on national languages and historical narratives. As democratic and discourse theorists like David Held (1997), Jürgen Habermas (2001), Melissa Williams (2003), and Nancy Fraser (2014) have already been arguing for many years, this national orientation of the public sphere is inappropriate in a globalized world. The national orientation of the public sphere undermines its *political legitimacy generating function* given that a great many of the decisions that are taken at the national level of decision-making end up affecting or subjecting many groups and persons who are not part of the national spheres of public deliberations. Examples include national energy, environmental, and industrial policies that end up having a pervasive impact on those who are living outside the national political community. The effects that these policies have on the intensification of harmful climatic changes is a case in point (Gardiner, 2004; Meyer & Roser, 2006; Moellendorf, 2014). In addition, the national orientation of the public sphere also hinders its *political efficacy*, given that several impactful decisions are made outside the nation-state, for example by transnational corporations (Crouch, 2004), inter- and supranational organizations of global governance (Zürn, 2018), non-majoritarian institutions like central banks and international courts (Schäfer & Zürn, 2021), or individual billionaires (Hägel, 2020). Accordingly, the national political deliberation cannot effectively impact the political decision-making process taking place beyond the state and thus cannot bind the decision-makers to the decision-takers. The nationally oriented public sphere may indeed change the way in which the national political representatives make decisions at the inter- and supranational levels. However, neither is there a direct connection between the national processes of public opinion- and will-formation and the decision procedures taking place outside the nation-state, nor are all of those who make decisions beyond the nation-state national political representatives (Fraser, 2014). To re-

gain its political legitimacy generating function and its political efficacy, the nationally oriented public spheres must therefore become more transnational. This is necessary to create a more direct connection between inter-, trans-, and supranational political deliberation and decision-making. The corresponding *political challenge* of education for political autonomy is thus to contribute to the formation of what I have elsewhere labeled *transnational democratic conscientization* (Culp, 2019, pp. 117–127). This means the formation of a transnational democratic consciousness of the citizens and residents of various states that would help enabling more transnational political discourses on matters of international or global concern. Arguably, democratically conceived practices of global citizenship education would be the most suitable forms of education for achieving these educational aims. Regarding the contents of education, these practices include the study of the history, politics, and culture of localities, traditions, and communities outside of the national context in which the schooling takes place. Furthermore, these practices place special emphasis on experiential learning experiences across cultures through international study trips and school partnerships. In these ways, as well as through a reflection on the changeable and constructed character on cultures in general, students should eventually learn to recognize persons of other citizenships as equally worthy of moral respect and become able to cooperate with them on fair terms (Culp, 2019, ch. 4 and 5).

A cultural feature of contemporary public spheres

A cultural feature of contemporary public spheres that poses a challenge to education for political autonomy are relatively recent processes of singularization (Reckwitz, 2020). These processes are cultural phenomena concerning forms of subjectification of individuals and groups in which individuals and groups put special emphasis on their identity in line with an ethos of authenticity (Taylor, 1991). The ‘society of singularities’ (Reckwitz, 2020) represents a development of cultural tendencies already inherent in Romanticism, which opposed the unifying and generalizing normative expectations arising from a supposedly all-encompassing way of conceiving reason and rationalization in the Enlightenment. In line with this oppositional stance towards rationalist standardization, the more recent processes of singularization contrast with the generalizing culture of the mid-20th century within Western societies. In this period individuals and groups supposedly adhered to common, ‘rational’ standards of middle classes lifestyles and followed similar patterns of consumption, production, and leisure time activities. Only ‘supposedly’, however, because the alleged cultural homogeneity of the post-war era was also a consequence of the oppression of non-standard, supposedly irrational forms of living – concerning one’s sexual orientation, for example. Still, the sense of a shared general culture, which may indeed have been relatively widespread in the mid-20th century, can plausibly be seen as resulting from the collectivist, nationalist efforts of the war and post-war reconstruction periods, as well as from the sense of solidarity and commonality that these efforts promoted. Following this historical trajectory, thus, the cultural liberation associated with the student movements of 1968 and the liberal culture that became more and more influential from the 1970s onward are crucial turning points of this cultural development of singularization. Later on, this development also included the emergence of new social movements – e.g. feminist, ecological, as well as gay and lesbian movements – that social philosophers like Axel Honneth (1996) have interpreted as engaging in a struggle for social recognition of their particular group-based and individual identities (also Taylor et al., 1994). Today, this cultural development is reflected in various forms of identity politics in which individuals and groups strive for the appropriate social recognition of their distinctive form of life – the social movements of BLM or LGBTQ+, for example. In addition, this cultural development can also be seen in the ways in which the creative economy generates highly individualized

products that enable consumers to imagine themselves and to present themselves vis-à-vis others in ways that reflect their unique personalities. Indeed, this cultural development can and should be seen as an increase of the positive freedom to live authentically in line with the values that one has reflectively affirmed as being constitutive of one's individual identity. At the same time, however, this development is also a challenge for the realization of political autonomy through deliberation within public spheres, as there are fewer shared points of reference – widely shared ways of thinking and acting, that is – based on which one could articulate normative principles or perspectives that promise to meet the criteria of reciprocity and generality. A more singularized culture simply makes the discursive engagement regarding principles of justice that are mutually shared more burdensome. It is hence a particularly important task of education for political autonomy to teach future citizens to reason and deliberate across cultural and social differences (also Brighouse, 2018). Arguably, certain forms of multicultural education, which place emphasis on practicing empathy and learning about different types of cultures, may be especially suitable for teaching practices oriented towards political autonomy. These forms of multicultural education ask students to engage deeply with at least one culture that is different from that into which they were socialized. This may take place in students' coursework, study trips, exchange programs, or in their encounters with other students, teachers, and administrators within a diverse school population. While this engagement is meant to enable students to recognize the profound differences between cultures, it should also stimulate an appreciation for cultures that are different from their own culture in which they were brought up. In addition, it should also point students towards shared characteristics that different cultures have in common, such as the considerable variety of cultural expressions within each culture, their changeability and the ways in which elites tend to influence what counts as an appropriate expression of a particular culture (Macedo, 2000; Levinson, 2009; Culp, 2019, ch. 5).

An economic feature of contemporary public spheres

An educationally relevant economic feature of contemporary public spheres is the formation of mono- or oligopolies of the so-called platform economy (Staab, 2020). In this type of economy certain services become increasingly attractive for consumers the more other consumers there are that also use the same services on the same platform. Communication via social media, for example, is a more valuable service the more other users there are to whom one can connect. Due to these network effects it is also relatively costly for consumers to switch to other platforms. Similarly, an online vending platform is more valuable if there are more vendors that use that platform to sell their products. These network effects of such platforms thus contribute to the formation of mono- or oligopolies, as smaller companies will eventually lack competitiveness. And the increasing economic success of the larger companies also enables them to buy up smaller competitors that offer potentially disruptive products that could steer consumers away from the larger platforms. This economic development tremendously enlarges the economic power of the most successful companies like Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Metaverse, or Microsoft. This is of significant relevance for the shape of contemporary public spheres, given that many of these companies operate online communication platforms. As a result of the mono- or oligopolistic standing of these companies, these platforms can afford allowing artificial intelligence to tilt media of communication in ways that maximize profit, even if this is not conducive to a deliberative and inclusive political reasoning. For example, technological companies may use algorithms that reinforce hate speech, fake news, or emotional contents, simply because these are the algorithms that increase or maximize clicks or user attention – and hence also the company's profit.

What follows from this economic domination of at least parts of contemporary public spheres for practices of education for political autonomy? Certain forms of socioeconomic education seem especially relevant. They should explain and transmit knowledge of how the economic sphere of private market interactions is closely related to the supposedly *public* sphere of political communication. The ‘economic colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives’ is not at all a new phenomenon (Habermas, 2006, 421–426). After all, media entrepreneurs like Silvio Berlusconi or Rupert Murdoch have been quite successful in aligning public opinion with their private, economic interests by shaping the political discourse on cable television, private news channels, and widely accessed print news media. Contemporary educators, however, need to think of novel ways of teaching students how to resist *the distinct forms of today’s* private domination of the public sphere. Suitable approaches to this task may include role games in which students play private actors, various public agencies, and citizens who use certain online communication platforms. Such role games are already practiced in contexts of environmental education in which students assume, for example, the roles of national political representatives within a simulation of an international climate change policy conference (Nijhawan, 2020). Similarly, students could take up the role of representatives of technological corporations, supranational regulatory bodies like the EU, and advocacy groups that debate the legal framework of political communication on social media platforms. In that way students may be able to experience how private actors can shape citizens’ discourse by applying certain rules of communication, how public agencies can prevent companies from acting in certain ways, and how citizens can influence the behavior of both public agencies and private actors. And this, in turn, may enable them to think and act creatively of how, in the future, a more inclusive and deliberative form of political communication may be realized in actual political practices.

A technological feature of contemporary public spheres

Finally, processes of digitization – including computerization, digitalization, and the internet – are yet another relevant feature of the public sphere, which also poses a distinct challenge for education understood as the development of political autonomy. The ‘digital transformation’ of the public sphere is driven by technical innovations like the Web 2.0 technology, facilitating the interactive usage of media content and allowing information consumers to turn into information producers. Thus, it involves a fundamental shift from one-to-many to many-to-many communication. In addition, portable devices permit permanent interconnectivity, broadband technology allows streaming of vast and variegated amounts of audiovisual content and increasing computer processing capacities speed up communication possibilities. It is beyond the scope of this contribution, however, to provide a detailed analysis of the various aspects of these processes of digitization. Of particular importance from the perspective of political autonomy and education for political autonomy, however, is the fragmentation of political discourse within the digitized public sphere. This fragmentation can arise, on the one hand, from the design of algorithms that feed users with information of a kind that corresponds to their already expressed political identity or group membership, as this promises to increase the use of the technological services (Sunstein, 2017). On the other hand, the fragmentation may also result from the technologically facilitated, increased capacities for communicative participation and expression, given that there are much fewer gatekeepers like editors or peers within a many-to-many communication environment (Mounk, 2018; Farrell & Schwartzberg, 2021). However, since the public sphere is meant to enable society-wide, that is, *inclusive* deliberation of political issues, it is problematic if political discussions are fragmented and separated from one another. This is not to deny, of course, that the diminished gatekeeping power that epistemic elites like journalists or academics nowadays exercise is

beneficial for increasing the number of participants and diversifying the perspectives that are expressed through publicly accessible media like Twitter. The extremely weak gatekeeping within the digitized public sphere implies, however, a multiplicity of often separate and isolated discourses, which is partly driven by relatively low levels of epistemic trust under conditions of weak gatekeeping (Farrell & Schwartzberg, 2021). And this fragmentation, in turn, renders it difficult to bridge or connect these various voices, ideas, and arguments that express themselves within digitized public spheres. Thus, while the formal political representatives may be better informed of the variety of existing views on a given political subject like migration policy, it may nevertheless be very difficult to identify which policy either reflects a minimal consensus or an equitable compromise between diverging political viewpoints.

As in the case of the cultural pluralization mentioned above, an important task of education for political autonomy may thus consist of teaching how to reason within very heterogeneous contexts and how to deal with seemingly irresolvable disagreement. On a more technical and also habit-oriented level, responding to this technological challenge may also involve learning how to avoid participating too often within relatively isolated online discussions. For example, students could study how their search results on search engines change depending on which online sites they have previously visited, or how their social media feed changes based on the profiles of which groups and users they visit. In that way students may develop an interest in deliberately diversifying their online experience, in the same way in which students in an analogue news environment had to learn the importance of reading a variety of the offerings provided by the print media press.

Conclusion

This brief overview of four features of contemporary public spheres and four corresponding challenges for political autonomy education highlighted the complexity of analyzing the relation between contemporary public spheres and education. This complexity can be seen as a warning that one-dimensional presentations of the contemporary formations of public spheres and their educational challenges may be one-sided. For example, it may be problematic to analyze public spheres primarily or even solely through the technological lens of digitization, and to neglect relevant economic or cultural features of public spheres. Thus, theorists of education who aim at contributing to educational practices that are suited for fostering political education should also keep this complexity in mind. Teaching technological skills or teaching students how to interact responsibly in online environments, for example, may indeed be important components of political education. However, given the normative relevance of said political, economic, and cultural aspects of contemporary public spheres for political education, educational theorists should also carefully reflect, and advise, on how students can learn to react appropriately to the changes in their political, economic, and cultural environments.

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Recommended Citation

Culp, J. (2022). Four challenges to political autonomy education in contemporary public spheres. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 5(14).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.14.1

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1. In the following, the term public sphere(s) refers to political public sphere(s), unless stated otherwise.