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Little Rock, Arkansas. Hannah Arendt, Ralph Ellison and Danielle Allen on education and the public sphere

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Three years after the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision Brown v. Board of Education, 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter a school previously reserved for white students in Little Rock, Arkansas. She was confronted by a white mob, spitting on her and shouting racist insults. The photographs taken that day went around the world. They inspired three different ways to think about the relationship between democracy, the public sphere, and education: Hannah Arendt, Ralph Ellison and Danielle Allen interpret the photos in very different ways – and their interpretations reveal much about their understanding of the public sphere. In this contribution, I will explore these three interpretations – and at least hint at their implications for the relationship between the public sphere and education.

Keywords: democracy, education, public sphere, sacrifice, segregation

On September 4, 1957, 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford set off for Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. She was well aware that she was not wanted there, that she was entering a world in which she should have no place. Three years after the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, the school was still a bastion of segregation. And yet Elizabeth had no idea that she would be facing a white mob all alone, spitting on her and shouting racist insults. As she tried to enter the high school, National Guardsmen blocked her way, the crowd still screaming and threatening her. Not knowing where to go, she made her way to a bus stop and sat down on a bench.

Elizabeth Eckford was not supposed to be alone at that moment. The plan had been to walk to school together with eight other students. By chance, however, the students were separated – and Elizabeth had to face the mob all on her own (Bates, 1986, p. 61ff.). In her memoir, Melba Pattillo Beals, who was also part of the Little Rock Nine, recalls: "The anger of that huge crowd was directed toward Elizabeth Eckford as she stood alone, in front of Central High, facing the long line of soldiers, with a huge crowd of white people screeching at her back. Barely five feet tall, Elizabeth cradled her books in her arms as she desperately searched for the right place to enter. Soldiers in uniforms and helmets, cradling their rifles, towered over her" (Beals, 1994, p. 49).

The photos taken that day went around the world. And they inspired three different ways to think about the relationship between democracy, the public sphere, and education: Hannah Arendt, Ralph Ellison and Danielle Allen interpret the images in very different ways – and their interpretations reveal much about their understanding of the public sphere. Arendt, in her 'Reflections on Little Rock', objected to what she called "enforced integration" (p. 49) and criticized Black parents who – in Arendt's view – not only sent their children to the front lines, but also unjustifiably dragged a social issue into the public sphere. Ellison responded to Arendt by

pointing out that Black families don’t have the opportunity to separate the public and the private in this neat way. Ellison’s critique, finally, is echoed by Political Scientist Danielle Allen over forty years after the events of Little Rock: To Allen, the photos show that American democracy was (and in other ways still is) based on a fundamental division – the division between those who were called to act publicly and those who were excluded from the public sphere; between those who could act (in the brightness of the public sphere) and those who had to suffer the consequences of that action (in the darkness of the private sphere).

The photos show the price a society pays for *this* democracy and *this* social peace; and they make evident, *who* is forced to pay that price.

In what follows, I will explore the three interpretations – and at least hint at their implications for the relationship between the public sphere and education.

1. Arendt

“The point of departure of my reflections was a picture in the newspapers showing a Negro girl on her way home from a newly integrated school: she was persecuted by a mob of white children, protected by a white friend of her father, and her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy. The picture showed the situation in a nutshell because those who appeared in it were directly affected by the Federal court order, the children themselves. My first question was, what would I do if I were a Negro mother? The answer: under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted” (Arendt, 1959b, p. 179).

Hannah Arendt’s ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ appeared in the left-wing *Dissent* in the winter of 1959. Arendt had already written it two years earlier at the request of another journal, which did not publish it (Schutz & Sandy, 2015). In her article, Arendt argued that the question of who is allowed to attend which school and who is not, is not a political and therefore public issue, but a social issue. “We are driven into [the social sphere] by the need to earn a living or attracted by desire to follow our vocation or enticed by the pleasure of company” (Arendt, 1959a, p. 51). The connections that people seek here, the associations they form, are relatively homogeneous: in the social sphere, groups usually remain among themselves. One does not have to expose oneself to others, to strangers. Only in the public sphere is one a stranger among other strangers. Here, group membership, social origin or descent play no role.

Along with Arendt’s article, *Dissent* published critical comments in the same issue, to which Arendt replied. The above quote is taken from this ‘Reply to Critics’ and it aims at her second major point of criticism: the role of Black parents who allowed their children to fight their battles. Arendt’s position is clear: what happened in Little Rock happened because a federal court and federal policy pushed into an area they should not have entered. Because they did, they forced Black students to push themselves into a group where they were not wanted – and in doing so, stripped them of their pride, their personal integrity (Lebeau, 2004). Even more: by placing its focus on overcoming segregation, the civil rights movement pushed the truly political issues into the background (Locke, 2013; Gines, 2014; Burroughs, 2015).

It is particularly noteworthy *how* Arendt criticized the (from her point of view) Civil Rights Movement’s problematic focus on social issues such as the desegregation of the schools in her

‘Reply to My Critics’. She claimed to speak not as a white New York intellectual, but as a Black mother from the Deep South. And as Arendt takes the floor in her place and thinks and speaks for her, this Black mother now recognizes that a parent should not expose her child “to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted” (Arendt, 1959b, p. 179). Because the desire for social advancement obscured the parents’ view, they could not perceive the suffering of their sons and daughters: “[O]ppressed minorities”, Arendt writes, “were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters” (Arendt, 1959a, p. 46).

Because she denies the marginalized the ability to truly think and grasp their situation, Arendt sees it as her duty to intervene with her supposedly unmarked gaze and to feel and speak in place of the Black mother.

2. Ellison

In ‘The World and the Jug’, a text from the 1960s, the novelist Ralph Ellison called Arendt’s contribution “the presumption of an Olympic authority” (Ellison, 2003, p. 156). Arendt, he argues, succumbs to the illusion of an all-surveying gaze that fails to realize that the Olympus from which it judges, categorizes, and ascribes is a white Olympus. When Arendt accuses Black parents of exploiting their children for their own social advancement, she fails to see that these children belong to a world in which racist violence is part of everyday life. The sheltered childhood that Arendt may have in mind does not exist in this world. And parents, whether they want to or not, must prepare their children for a life in this hostile environment.

In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Ellison elaborated on this point. It appeared in 1965 in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, which collected interviews with various Civil Rights activists (Arendt had a copy in her library, though without annotations, see Knott, 2022, p.26.). Ellison explained that Black Americans had to train a range of skills to survive in this hostile society. They had to see through the mechanisms that kept society running and closely observe the behaviours of their fellow citizens. W. E. B. Du Bois had called this “the second sight”: the disillusioned and at the same time clairvoyant gaze of those who are familiar with the world they observe, who know its mechanisms and most intimate secrets, although they participate in them only as excluded and dominated subjects (Du Bois, 1975, p. 29; Ellison never referred to Du Bois in this matter).

Like Du Bois, Ellison argued that those who lived behind the veil had not only to become close observers of their surroundings but needed to constantly refine their own introspection and self-control. To live in this hostile world, to know the price America pays for the promise of freedom – namely, one’s own life, one’s own liberty, one’s own integrity – and at the same time to hold on to that promise of freedom and claim it for oneself is the tremendous task imposed on every Black American:

“This places a big moral strain upon the individual, and it requires self-confidence, self-consciousness, self-mastery, insight, and compassion. In the broader sense it requires an alertness to human complexity. Men [sic!] in our situation simply cannot afford to ignore the nuances of human relationships” (Ellison in Warren, 1965, p. 343).

And this is precisely the point at which Ellison comes to Hannah Arendt:

“At any rate, this too has been part of the American Negro experience, and I believe that one of the

important clues to the meaning of that experience lies in the idea, the ideal of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt's failure to grasp this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly off into left field in her 'Reflections on Little Rock' in which she charged Negro parents with exploiting their children during the struggle to integrate schools. But she has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. Yet they are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child, a confrontation of the terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away. And in the outlook of many of these parents (who wish that the problem didn't exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger precisely because he is a Negro American. Thus, he's required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt – then his is one more sacrifice. It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harsher" (Ellison in Warren, 1965, pp. 343–44).

Arendt assumed that there is a shared world "that is in good enough shape to articulate and draw together her own position and that of a black mother" (Steele, 2002, p. 187). But, as Ellison points out, she fails to see who remains invisible in this world, which voices remain unheard, which accomplishment and which sacrifices remain inaccessible to her own experience.

3. Allen

Both Arendt and Ellison took the incidents in Little Rock as an opportunity to reflect on the nature and state of democracy, public space, citizenship, and education. Although there are a lot of assumptions both share – such as the praise of plurality –, they come to completely different conclusions on this point. Whereas Arendt seeks to keep the public sphere pure by drawing rigid boundaries, Ellison seeks to show that public action inflicts wounds and demands sacrifices that remain in the dark.

This is precisely the point Danielle Allen takes up in *Talking to Strangers. Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*: what must the public sphere be like so that the wounds, the suffering, and the sacrifices themselves can become the subject of public negotiation? The lesson Little Rock holds for Allen is this: one must ignore the command that parents commonly give their children, namely, not to talk to strangers. Democracy is notoriously conflictual. Those who live in it must not indulge in illusions of unity and agreement, but must reckon with irreconcilable differences and dissent, they must even expect them. People encounter each other in the public sphere not as confidants, but as strangers who must nevertheless act together. In this context, for Allen, the very question of what can appear in the public space and what is relegated to the private sphere becomes an eminently political one (Grabau, 2020).

Arendt's commentary on the events in Little Rock insisted on the non-political nature of the high school controversy. For Arendt, education and teaching were not political matters but were based on private decisions and preferences. In her view, private interests and cultural ties make real communication impossible. This is the decisive difference: Arendt's "men" are strangers, too, but they can act together without carrying the burdens of everyday life, the burdens of reproduction, the burden of care for others. This is not given to Allen's strangers. They bear heavily what has happened to them, what has been, what is still done to them. They can't just take the weight off their shoulders because it has inscribed itself in their muscles and nerves. Moreover, the burden these strangers carry is not equally heavy, the wounds not equally deep. The relations of domination do not stop at the boundary of the social sphere. A realistic theory of the relationship

between the public sphere and education, says Allen, must take this into account. And it must provide information about which skills, abilities or – as Allen calls it – "habits" people need in order to encounter each other as strangers and still be able to act together.

The habits that are necessary in order to encounter each other – as Allen calls it following Aristotle – as political friends, must do justice to the inescapable interconnectedness or "intricacy" (Allen, 2005, p. 46) of one's own life with the lives of others. The ideal citizens of a democratic community are therefore aware of the vulnerability of other people because they are aware of their own vulnerability. They are rhetorically trained, not to persuade others, but to be able to assess the hurtful effects of their own words on others. They are not only willing to turn to others, but to include them in decision-making processes. They need certain skills in dealing with other people to establish trust, make concessions, negotiate conflicts, or endure defeats (Allen, 2004, pp. 134–41). Political friends know that they remain strangers to each other, but they recognize something shared in this strangeness that makes joint action possible without having to contain differences – something that Ralph Ellison has called "antagonistic cooperation" (Ellison, 2003, p. 188).

There is one issue, which I believe is of utmost importance, that Allen does not consider: in order to meet each other as strangers in "antagonistic cooperation", it is necessary to understand that we are never completely identical with ourselves, that the complexity and chaos of social and political life does not stop at the border of our skin. We are strangers to each other, *and* we are strangers to ourselves. The dominant political tradition in the U.S. was able to (and still is able to) hide this fact by separating the multiformity of American life into two clearly distinguished identities and spheres – something that Ellison's contemporary James Baldwin has repeatedly pointed out: the illusion of a white identity that explained who one was depended on the construction of the 'Negro'. The moment this notion begins to crumble, the world we inhabit becomes a different, more complex one. Recognizing oneself and each other as strangers, ironically, does not mean being able to maintain a safe distance; rather, it drives one to be more engaged with each other and with oneself. What was kept at a distance now forces itself upon us, what once seemed familiar now becomes problematic – and this applies especially to one's own identity, when it can no longer be secured by the categories we had used to describe ourselves and others. "[C]ategories", Eddie S. Glaude Jr. wrote in his book about James Baldwin, "can shut us off from the complexity of the world and the complexity within ourselves. For Jimmy, 'complexity is our only safety'" (Glaude Jr., 2020, p. 113).

Therefore, a different way of thinking about democracy must encourage people to renounce the security offered by the nature of categorizations and prescribed identities – which means in this context, as Juliet Hooker (2016) has pointed out in her critique of Danielle Allen, fighting white supremacy by any means necessary. And it must encourage us to recognize that we remain strangers not only to each other, but to ourselves. Ellison insisted that every human being can escape the categories that try to describe and (via this description) fix him. "We know we're not the creatures which our enemies in the White South would have us to be, and we know too that neither colour nor our civil predicament explain us adequately" (Ellison, 2003, p. 76). In order to recognize each other as strangers, people must break free from the assumptions about who they are and who they are not, where they belong and where they don't belong, what they are able to do and what they cannot do. There is no public deliberation without emancipation from the categories that we use to imprison others and with which we imprison ourselves.

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