

## Political Events and the Making of Democratic Citizens

Sigal Ben-Porath  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Mario Di Paolantonio's essay draws our attention to a vital aspect of the juncture between education and politics, namely, the pedagogical significance of political events. Through his theoretical discussion and his analysis of the Trial of the Military, we are invited to consider the public educational opportunities occurring in transitional democracies. The spreading of democracy around the globe in recent years, as well as some processes of exported democratization, has prompted a growing scholarly debate on the desirable forms of supporting the evolvement of such polities. Within this context, one can find more attention to legal and political concerns, and less to educational ones. Beyond it, while discussion of schools and the education system from a political perspective abounds (relatively speaking) — how schools create citizens, how curricula should reflect civic concerns and shape political knowledge and attitudes — the complementary discussion of how politics educates citizens is far less common. Di Paolantonio's essay adds a significant contribution to this debate, by drawing our attention to public pedagogy in times of transition.

The generation of solidarity is a main aspect of nation-building, and societies emerging from an era of undemocratic rule are sometimes in need of openly reaffirming their national ethos, reformulating their values, and constructing through a public debate a new vision of their social tenets and aims. In *Stories of Peoplehood*, Rogers Smith argues that "ethically constitutive stories" are of particular importance in the politics of peoplehood.<sup>1</sup> In other words, a main component of the shared understanding of what the national group is about, its main mores, characteristics, past events, and future hopes, is constituted through the public endorsement of commonly held beliefs about the nation's history. In transitional democracies, the urge to generate a renewed common understanding of the national ethos, one that would be more participatory and inclusive, sometimes trumps other considerations, including ones that characterize ongoing division and conflict as desirable aspects of a functional democracy. According to Smith, ethically constitutive stories are ubiquitous features of politics — they can in different periods be more or less prominent, but never absent. Trials, like Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, are often not only attempts to reach legal judgments but also efforts to revise the national narrative to make it seem more legitimate and morally compelling. In this process some transitional democracies have opted to prefer truth over justice; or, in other words, to prefer the dialogue that comes with the unraveling truths about the past over the justice that could come from formal legal procedures. Argentina chose the path of justice and in the process lost some of its access to truth, as the self-proclaimed "guardians of the nation" refused to disclose some of their past actions and demanded amnesty.

This tension between truth and justice extends beyond decisions on how to deal with the immediate past. It signifies a moment of "reflexive encounter" that should

be used for delineating the limits of this particular democratic order, its political landscape, and its national imagination. Di Paolantonio's analysis, while starting from the Argentinean case, offers general considerations on ways to negotiate these limits. Such analysis is welcome in other democratic contexts as well, but it is crucial in transitional democracies, where the citizenry begins the long process of developing a common understanding of their new political structure. This understanding, as we know, requires much more than acquiring a formal knowledge on the newly organized branches of government or election processes. Di Paolantonio contests the common assumption that the values, skills, and attitudes vital in countries moving toward democracy often include solidarity, the rule of law, reconciliation, and a common understanding of national history and memory. This widely held belief is counter productive in transitional contexts, the author tells us, because it stands the grave risk of allowing undemocratic values to remain central in the public debate, and shift the public opinion away from democratic commitments. The incommensurability of values is the basis for his call for an exclusionary model that rejects dialogue and deliberation in favor of a stronger affiliation with the core values of democracy.

The tension between conflicting depictions of the national ethos is represented in the ongoing debate on the proper uses of history studies. On the one end are those who demand the teaching of "noble, moralizing history," and consider national pride a desirable result of history studies. On the other end are those who demand truthfulness and factuality to serve as the only guidelines of the history teacher, both because of the primacy of truth and because of the possible negative effect on student's perspectives when they realize the "lies my teacher told me."<sup>2</sup> While he may be leaning closer to the second position, Di Paolantonio's perspective is in opposition to both, suggesting that their focus on national solidarity on the one hand and factuality on the other hand misses the public pedagogic point. His perspective echoes Gerald Graff's "teaching the conflicts" approach, which emphasizes the fairness of teaching both sides to a value conflict, as well as the benefits to democracy when students are exposed to varying perspectives, learn about their arguments, and thus experience arguing, respecting other positions, and containing conflict in a democratic setting.<sup>3</sup>

But Di Paolantonio's aims are broader. He does not only want to make room and give voice to different perspectives. Neither does he focus his attention solely on learning deliberative skills. More significantly, he insists that it is the conflict itself that has democratic value, and that conflict has a formative role, particularly in transitional moments.

The conflict in question could be framed in two possible ways. One is more narrowly, as a conflict between democratic and non-democratic values. The other is a broader depiction of conflict as democratically desirable, not only during transition but also as a tool for nurturing a viable option of dissent, ideological diversity and a constant flow of new, disturbing ideas that may help us avoid political and moral stagnation. Di Paolantonio seems to rely on literature that supports the latter, but at

the end he opts for the former, narrower justification for the desirability of conflict in transitional democracies.

I agree that there is a significant formative value for conflict in democracy generally, and in moments of transition even more urgently. In fact, although the author argues against commonly held preferences for inclusion, deliberation, and dialogue and for exclusion and conflict as more democratic in this context — a controversial enough position — I would urge him to push the limit even further, and to consider the formative role of broader forms of conflict in other democratic contexts as well. This may be his point when he refers to radical pedagogy and democracy as a constructive outcome of his discussion. Following radical interpretations of democracy, in the political as well as the educational context, we could consider an even more central role preserved for alternative memories and perspectives, and conflicting visions of society. In a move reminiscent of Carl Schmidt's vision of politics as a realm of contained conflict, the article suggests that, instead of aiming solely toward consensus and reconciliation, trials for past abuses should leave ample room for conflict. His focus on transition and on the Trial directs him to suggest a manifestation of conflict that is mainly between democratic and undemocratic values, or commitments. From this vintage point he advocates the centrality of conflict between these two incommensurable sets of values for the pedagogical purpose of manifesting their exclusive public essence, and for the purpose of supporting the one set by way of rejecting the other. Understanding the formative role conflict plays in the transitional democratic process is essential for the generation of democratic affiliations, and, I suggest, this understanding should be affirmed and extended into the context of more stable democratic polities. A public sphere that contains and positively responds to value conflict can allow more room for dissent, maintain ideological diversity, and thus support of more active citizenry and a stronger democracy. Democracies which encounter various crises — conflict, cold war, terror attacks, large scale riots, and civil rifts — all face the risk, or possibility, of changing their democratic landscape. Public pedagogy that works with conflict, delineates the contours of the acceptable (as widely as possible), and gives its citizenry the tools to productively respond to conflictual circumstances stands a better chance of maintaining its basic structure in the long run.

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1. Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

2. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1995).

3. Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W.W. Norton Press, 1992).