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Education and democratization. An introduction

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ABSTRACT

Democracy as a regime and as a way of life requires strong ethical-political sensibilities and enabling social preconditions to the creation of which education may be especially conductive. The related normative tasks that we expect from education to carry out are daunting as such. However, they become even more difficult to fulfil in the contemporary contexts of exacerbated adversities. Democracy and democratic education have fallen into various crisis and are facing multiple challenges; this worry is shared by many educational theorists. Thus, today, there is an urgent call to rethink the relationship between education and democratization. This special issues responds to that call with educational-philosophical papers that explore yet undertheorized dimensions of the connection of civic education and democratic development.

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In 2019, Lynda Stone began her article on democracy in this journal with the following statement: ‘Worldwide these are dangerous times for democracy’ (Stone 2019, 143). The four years that have passed since that statement have not disproven its alarming tone. In a most recent book on democratic education, Julian Culp’s, Johannes Drerup’s and Douglas Jacek’s main question resonates with Stone’s statement: ‘how can schools respond to the challenges that current democracies face?’ (Culp, Drerup, and Yacek 2023). For Stone, the prospect of mitigating such challenges and dangers involves the educational cultivation of a heightened ethical commitment. Not only philosophers but also ‘national and transnational policymakers,’ as Torill Strand notes, ‘tend to portray ethical-political education as a remedy’ in the face of what might be called a ‘democratic recession’ (Strand 2020, 1). Remedial action may require, if we follow Itay Snir’s approach, political prerequisites: students and citizens should learn not only to diagnose the ethical deficit in their societies but also to formulate and advance political demands towards a radical democracy (Snir

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2017, 357), that is, a democracy that combats inequalities and is not limited to merely formal, procedural deliberation.

From a different philosophical perspective, following Cornelius Castoriadis, Ingerid Straume also emphasizes the need for a synergy of ethics and politics. This synergy will help educational theorists deal with contemporary crises and pathologies of democracy and explore the role that education may play in this context. Straume connects democracy with the ethical *paideia* of the democratic citizen. She draws 'some of the virtues that may characterise the subjects of such a regime' from an aretaic set that contains inter alia 'a commitment to common interests (*enjeux publics*), truthfulness, responsibility, intellectual and democratic courage (*parrhesia*) and a certain kind of shame which the Greeks called *aidôs*' (Straume 2014, 195). The matter is not just ethical but also socio-historical and political because 'this "democratic shame" is a social and political virtue;' according to Castoriadis and Straume, this virtue 'is needed in order to temper the always present temptation in a democracy, namely *hubris*,' the over-confidence and audacious self-assurance that may come to characterize the citizen. 'Through *aidôs*, the citizens in a democracy are urged towards self-limitation in a situation where no external limits exist' (Straume 2014, 195). Overall, relying on political thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt and Castoriadis, Straume (2014, 188) argues that 'to educate is to assume responsibility for the world.' Phenomena related to democracy are social and philosophical; '*education makes social and philosophical phenomena matter* because, in education, we need to justify our practices of teaching and child rearing and demonstrate their significance' (Straume 2014, 188, emphasis in the original).

From yet another standpoint, that of a democratic theory of race, Ellis Reid (2020) converges with the aforementioned educational philosophers on the link between democratic deficits and educational challenges. Reid shows that the inability to detect inequalities and injustices and how these may be enforced and propagated through educational policies reflect the extent to which contemporary democracy is plagued by deep crises. The plea is to rethink the normative underpinnings of education along lines of more drastic democratization: the demand is that 'we revisit how we think about the value of schools to the students and communities they serve' (Reid 2020, 771). More broadly, as Strand (2020, 2) puts it, the tendency is to argue that 'ideas on ethical-political education should not be separated from images of a vigorous democracy.' The education of character is placed centre stage since, 'in the intersection between "democracy" and "ethical-political education," democratic will formation seems crucial' (Strand 2020, 2). The will of citizens should be formed in spaces of freedom and participation, and not in conditions of coercion. Therefore, democratic education involves a normative doubleness: as Culp, Drerup and Jacek note, democratic education cannot just be an education *for* democracy; it should also be 'education *as*

democracy (democratic pedagogy).’ These dimensions of it ‘constitute two practical desiderata that limit and complement each other’ (Culp, Drerup, and Yacek 2023, 6).

The rethinking of education and democratization, regardless of the philosophical standpoint from which it is approached, invites, and justifies, further research ‘on creating and sustaining democratic spaces in education’ (Haynes and Suissa 2022, 939). Sometimes, such a rethinking involves explorations of ‘the central questions at the heart of experiments in democratic education’ (Haynes and Suissa, 939). Education is expected to have ‘a role to play in addressing the important questions of our time’ (Straume 2014, 188). Or, sometimes, the critical impetus to rethink democratic education is so strong that, as Culp, Drerup and Yacek put it, some thinkers posit that ‘we should seriously reconsider the status of democratic education as an educational ideal and recognize its intrinsically hegemonic, bourgeois, or oppressive character’ (Culp, Drerup, and Yacek 2023, 3). Or, less sweepingly, instead of incriminating democratic education wholesale, we should rethink it in its complexity and multiple operations, some of which may be enabling while others may be counterproductive. From this perspective, new questions must be posed, such that new connections between democracy, citizenship education and other normative notions will emerge and illuminate democratization through education differently (Papastephanou 2023a).

Of course, the normative coupling of a democratic way of life with an ethico-politically educated character and social preconditions conducive to democracy is no new thing. Indicatively, in Roman times, Plutarch (1969) staged a fictive symposium¹ among the seven sages of the 6th century B.C., that is, before the emergence of democracy as an Athenian political regime. Evoking fragments inter alia from Pre-Socratic thought, Plutarch asked what qualities were necessary for a democracy. Among the sages, Thales appeared to consider the narrowing of the gap between rich and poor as the social precondition of the best democracy, while Anacharsis claimed that the best democracy is that in which the people are capable of valuing virtue as the desired good (Plutarch 1969; *Moralia* 146b-164d; see also Becker 2019). More generally, the coupling of democracy with the education of the demos that would lead to practising good government and to navigating through crises (*staseis*) and changes (*metabolai*) preoccupied philosophy in the ancient Greek world and beyond it (Sebastiani and Leão 2022).² From antiquity to the present, in ways too many to account in this introduction (for some such ways, see, for instance, Culp, Drerup, and Yacek 2023; Strand 2020), philosophical reflection has struggled to define this coupling from the perspective of how education may serve the vision of a democratic world. All since John Dewey’s seminal book on ‘Democracy and Education’ (Dewey 1916/1976), in which he promoted the inextricable connection of education and democracy, there has been a strong belief in education as the driving force of democratic development (Strand 2020).

As Michael Peters and Tina Besley write, 'democracy – its theory, practice and educational applications – has been a favoured topic for philosophers of education' ever since Dewey's *Democracy and Education* 'even although it [democracy] rarely matched reality' (Peters and Besley 2021, 1). Indeed, the realities of a worldwide democratic recession, despite a steady rise in literacy rates over the past 50 years, contest orthodox or well-rehearsed ideas on political education. Schooling has not proven to be the best means for generating democratic values and forms of practice. Moreover, civic education does not necessarily enable people to become more autonomous, collaborative, and solidary. Education is clearly a double-edged sword, carrying prospects of inclusion as well as exclusion, of promoting as well as undermining democratic values and forms of practice. Today, it is widely acknowledged that a growing nationalism, populism and polarizations put democratic institutions under pressure. They erode the citizens' trust in institutions and in systemic mechanisms of power and knowledge production (Strand 2015). 'Post-truth attitudes and truth decay pose serious obstacles to good civic reasoning'; in such social contexts, 'citizens struggle to draw clear distinctions between fact and opinion, weigh personal beliefs and emotions over facts, and increasingly distrust traditionally respected sources of information' (Stitzlein 2023, 51).

However, it is important also to acknowledge that, apart from glaring pathologies such as far-right populism, pathologies of the system itself in its democratic pretensions have also given rise to public distrust. Fundamentally, 'in the Western world, most polities of today are probably better characterized by Castoriadis's term, "liberal oligarchies" rather than democracies proper' (Straume 2014, 191). Andreas Kalyvas registers the complex and competitive interconnectivity of oligarchies and its effects on masses – an interconnectivity that helps illustrate democratic deficits that are not reducible to the glaring ills of populism, xenophobia, nationalism and the like. 'A reorganization of the capitalist state in the present phase' reveals that 'antagonisms within the ruling oligarchy and its factions' have been sharpened. The new era has been marked by the ruling oligarchy's 'attempt to neutralize, absorb, or channel the growing popular dissatisfaction' (Kalyvas 2019, 388). Kalyvas thus draws attention to 'the renewed hegemonic quest for legitimacy' that 'corresponds to the intensification of competition within the ruling oligarchic block among rival class factions'. These factions 'represent different capitalist sections and interests, appeal to different electoral constituencies and class alliances, and advocate diverse politico-economic projects' (Kalyvas, 388). At odds with true democracy, liberal oligarchies and neoliberal globalization have exacerbated the 'economic inequalities, precarization, and pauperization' (388) that give rise to multiple forms of social unrests or to apathy and to a waning public trust in global politics.

The complex politics of an oligarchic usurpation of democracy that triggers an increasing popular distrust and dissatisfaction cannot but be reflected in the

educational context in ways that entail the need to reformulate and sharpen the normative tasks of civic education. 'The character and quality of citizens' interactions are a crucial aspect for any democracy'; the citizens' engagement (or lack thereof) makes 'a significant difference between a deliberative society and an electoral oligarchy' (Zaphir 2018, 359). The era of widely felt crisis is often determined as a 'time of distrust in and questioning of the central institutions of democratic government' (Haynes and Suissa 2022, 939). It is also a time of contemporary challenges 'to the mainstream system of state schooling' (Haynes and Suissa, 939). In such conditions that affect educational and social contexts drastically, educators, students, families and communities are expected to 'keep democratic values and principles alive' by turning the creation of democratic spaces into an everyday practice (Haynes and Suissa, 939).

Rethinking and developing democratic educational philosophy and research should contribute to our undertaking responsibility by 'enriching our discussions about the meaning and value of democratic education' (Haynes and Suissa 2022, 939). That children in their classrooms should learn through democratic processes entails that 'democracy is not merely prescribed, but instead becomes a way of life' (Motherway 2022, 998). In other words, within educational philosophy, democracy is not construed as a political notion narrowed down to designating 'a form of government only' or 'a model of a state.' Nor is it regarded 'as an abstract idea that every now and then materializes into everyday experience' (Strand 2020, 2). In much educational theory, democracy is rather studied as a set of 'tangible forms of everyday and inclusive practices that mirror and shape loyalties and identification with a polis (body of citizens)' (Strand, 2). In fact, the idea that democracy should be enacted and lived out as an ethico-political project, and facilitated through appropriate education, is widely endorsed in educational philosophy. And most of the relevant literature (e.g. Culp, Drerup, and Yacek 2023; Morita 2022; Peters and Besley 2021; Reid 2020; Snir 2017; Stone 2019; Strand 2015; Straume 2014) emphasizes that this normative idea is even more significant in our times, that is, in times of uncertainty, crises and challenges. We notice, therefore, that the normative task of coupling democracy and education is strengthened by a 'democracy-in-crisis' sense of urgency that also propels a rethinking of what may count as a civic education for democratization.

Therefore, the democracy-in-crisis idiom offers additional legitimacy and topicality to the very mobilization of educational-philosophical thought that engages with such tasks and produces related research projects, books, articles and special issues (ours included). However, the democracy-in-crisis idiom has already been problematized (e.g. Kalyvas 2019) in ways that are most informative for an educational theory that hopes to avoid a facile rethinking of democratic citizenship education. Though this cannot be fully argued out here,³ it is indicated as a cautionary remark that the current emphasis that many educational theorists place on crises of democracy could or should also be rethought

and complicated (Papastephanou 2023b). The claim is not that there is no actual crisis; the claim is rather that this should not block insight into the politics of using a rhetoric of conspicuous challenges such as the democracy-in-crisis idiom. Kalyvas pertinently shows that ‘the thesis of a democratic crisis has the paradoxical quality of exposing some old and deep contradictions of the liberal doctrines of politics’ (Kalyvas 2019, 385). One such contradiction is that, on the one hand, ‘liberals ritualistically denounce populism for its polemical uses of the friend/enemy distinction, its excessive partisanship and its simplistic antagonistic logic;’ yet, on the other hand, ‘they declare that populism is an existential enemy of the liberal democratic order that must be defeated and exorcised for normality to return. By so doing, they reproduce the very same binary antagonism they oppose’ (Kalyvas 2019, 385). There is also the risk that the democracy-in-crisis idiom may lead to an idealization of the past: ‘as such, the idea that democracy is currently in a state of crisis exposes a nostalgic disposition that glorifies and romanticizes the times of post-democratic neoliberal hegemony’ (Kalyvas, 386). In our view, then, an additional and future theoretical task concerning the rethinking of education and democracy today is to ‘interrogate some of the unthematized political assumptions and normative premises that overdetermine the crisis-of-democracy thesis’ (Kalyvas, 384).

Be that as it may, the fact is that, whether in critical times or not, the time-honoured normative expectation that education will produce democratization has not quite been fulfilled. As mentioned previously, awareness of related failures propels (or so it should) further rethinking of education, democracy and their connection. Some problems of democracy may be more firmly rooted (than a crisis idiom allows us to perceive) in a modern competitive liberalism (Michéa 2009) that ‘privatizes’ democracy and, as Adriana Cavarero has argued, in a modernity that favoured and cultivated the individualism that undermines democracy. At odds with the Aristotelian *koinonia*⁴ (community), the dominant logic in ‘modernity erases the natural bond and thinks of individuals as autonomous, isolated, and competitive’ (Cavarero 2005, 186). It presents the community that ‘keeps them together – namely, the state’ as a ruling over mere individuals and an atomized society. This has detrimental effects on modern democracy (Cavarero 2005, 186) and compels a more thorough rethinking of the constellation of democracy, citizenship and education. Another difficulty which invites further rethinking of the link between democracy and education is that there are yet under-studied conceptual issues concerning what type of democracy is empirically or theoretically examined in association with educational issues: ‘there are many types of democracy apart of liberal democracy, including authoritarian, conservative, deliberative, direct, grassroots, Jeffersonian, majoritarian, multiparty, national, participatory, procedural, radical, representative, religious, socialist, totalitarian, and workplace’ (Peters and Besley 2021, 3). Employed as a generic term in many educational discourses, democracy is sometimes at risk of being construed as a generality, a mere placeholder for

just any set of values that citizenship education is expected to generate. Moreover, at a deeper, meta-theoretical level, as Gert Biesta (2022) has recently argued, the problem of instrumentalising education, even if this is for the sake of a noble ideal such as democratization, cannot just be wished away. The problem is not quite how effective education might be in generating democratic values; the problem is how far the democratic critique of educational instrumentalism can go without jettisoning the (deep-down instrumentalist) expectation that education should be the vehicle for the delivery of the democratic political agenda. In other words, the rethinking of democracy and education to which this special issue also subscribes may require some shift beyond conventional perspectives and a deeper understanding of the phenomena of education, democratization and their connection.

Let us sum up how we have so far canvassed the educational and ethical-political backdrop of this special issue. Democracy as a regime and as a way of life requires strong ethical-political sensibilities and enabling social preconditions to the creation of which education may be especially conducive. The related normative tasks that we expect from education to carry out are daunting as such. However, they become even more difficult to fulfil in the contemporary contexts of exacerbated adversities. Democracy and democratic education have fallen into various crises and are facing multiple challenges; this worry is shared by many educational theorists. Thus, today, there is an urgent call to rethink the relationship between education and democratization. This special issue responds to such a call with educational-philosophical papers that explore yet undertheorized dimensions of the connection of civic education and democratic development. Tensions and related gaps such as 'élites vs the people,' 'the local vs the global' and 'theory vs practice' often worry educational research on democracy and intensify the need to rethink established frameworks. Many contributors to the present special issue deploy their rethinking of education, democracy and concomitant challenges along such concerns.

How we understand the world ontologically crucially affects what counts as the telos of democracy and the education that may serve it beyond, and at variance with, the ontology that the neoliberal technoscientific capitalist order globally promotes. Şevket Benhür Oral tackles this neglected though very important topic and urges us to re-imagine democracy, in the current context of many daunting challenges, by attributing to democracy and its education a new telos in a non-teleological world. Reimagining democratic citizenship education is also the normative task that Yusef Waghid's contribution advances, though from a different, more context- and ethics-oriented perspective. Through an analysis of the philosophy of higher education in Africa, Waghid investigates what ethical responses to localized democratic deficits and challenges may be necessary for a vision of further democratization. Another challenge that democratization faces is the gap between the democratic rhetoric of educational leadership and management discourses, on the one hand,

and, on the other hand, the practices that perpetuate disadvantages, exclusions, and inequalities. This gap of theory and practice is addressed by Nuraan Davids who examines failures of 'School Governing Body' structures to fulfil promises of democratization in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Her critical discussion makes visible the importance of reconsidering governance with an eye to how it may be ensured that interpretations of democratisation of schools will not subvert education as a public good.

Also setting out from the acute challenges of today's world, Rafał Włodarczyk and Leszek Koczanowicz direct our attention to everyday life as the most essential terrain where issues and tensions of democracy and related educational practice are played out. They examine the relationship of formal education and everydayness in the context of the school's task to prepare children and young people to live in contemporary democracies. They find the task unfulfilled and pending. Using this growing deficit of educational preparedness for democratic politics as their springboard, Włodarczyk and Koczanowicz aspire to answer the question: what are the consequences for democracy and education when everyday life has become the main field of political and socio-ethical decision-making in the age of populism? Gaps of various kinds, generally, represent one of the major challenges of democracy and democratic education. Like other contemporary educational theorists who worry about the gap between masses and ruling oligarchies and the gap's undemocratic effects, Maria Mendel and Tomasz Szkudlarek are concerned about the divisions that separate global élites and local communities. To revisit cosmopolitan and democratic theory, Mendel and Szkudlarek borrow Olav Eikeland's neologism 'koinopolis' and explore whether turning it into 'koinopolitanism' may provide the missing link that is so much needed for bridging social gaps and keeping away their undemocratic repercussions.

Beyond the tendency to rethink democracy and its education in association with current, striking challenges, Marianna Papastephanou investigates how the rethinking of curiosity in its ambiguous politics reveals complex and neglected challenges that democratic theory and education should address. Curiosity is not just an epistemic concept. It has served political purposes, among them repugnant ones such as the imperial (recall here the colonial curiosity cabinets). Curiosity is typically couched in an acquisitionist, individualist and depoliticized idiom that ignores curiosity's diverse political operations and does not facilitate an investigation of its intricate connection with democracy and democratic education for all. Nancy Vansieleghem contributes to the exploration of a democratic education for all by describing an art project that stages an experimental site supportive of an attentive attitude towards the world. In her terms, tasting the world together enables learning discernment and world care. Democratic development may thus be served by challenging the implicit instrumentalization of the arts while also advancing art as a praxis that adds to the existing worldview experiences that trigger a sensitivity to what emerges

as new and different realities. Luis Guerra's contribution also turns to collaborative artistic practice, democracy and education, but it tackles the issue from the perspective of how art may offer informal political devices that promote and enact radical democracy. Approaching the doubleness of education as a pharmakon that may heal or poison, Guerra discusses the pedagogical role of art beyond the parameters of order and surveillance established in a given society.

How education involves democratic values and aspires to cultivate them through diverse practices also preoccupies Bianca Thoilliez, Francisco Esteban and David Reyero. They focus their scope on educational spaces (memorials, museums and libraries) outside schooling in order to reformulate the edifying potential of studying one's cultural heritage for democratic purposes. They claim that, by navigating past and present legacies, such spaces may contribute to democratizing education. Democratic education must be enriched, Thoilliez, Esteban and Reyero argue, with emotional and empathetic learning and with what a post-critical line of thought might offer to democratic discourses. An important enrichment and rethinking of democratic education may also be provided by another cultural resource: cinematic experience. Mining Alain Badiou's line of thought, which is very critical of the world of today and thus constitutes a valuable standpoint for addressing democratic deficits, Torill Strand discusses the Iranian film *Hit the Road* as exemplary of the triadic relationship of cinema, philosophy and paideia. She discloses the latent pedagogies of the film as illustrations of an ethical-political education that is especially conducive to democratization. Strand's broader intention is to revisit cinematic experience and its pedagogical significance through Badiou's distinctive philosophy of cinema and its affordances for re-theorizing democratic education.

Most of the educational-philosophical scholarship locates the daunting task of rethinking the coupling of civic education and democratization within a democracy-in-crisis rationale. As we have argued above, some such rethinking, after all, may also involve a prior interrogation of the over-reliance on the metaphor of contemporary crises of democracy that is so over-used in contemporary educational-philosophical discussions of democracy and education. However, instead of mentioning this as a weakness or an unfulfilled dimension of the current special issue, we use it as an indication that self-reflectivity compels a necessary awareness that engaging with democracy is always an incomplete operation whose accomplishment is ever receding.

Notes

1. The importance of deliberative process and equality of all for democracy is acknowledged also in Plutarch's text. The sages referred to the symposium itself in terms that

chime with the notion of a democratic space, as enacting a kind of democratic deliberation, and praised its benefits and value for living and thinking together. One of the symposium participants even emphasizes that ‘the “opportunity to speak” (λόγος)’ during the symposium should not be ‘measured “according to wealth” (πλουτίνδην) or “according to birth/merit” (ἀριστίνδην).’ ‘Rather, “like in a democracy,” “everyone should get equal opportunities” to drink and to partake in discussion’ (Becker 2019, 37).

2. Democratic practices and forms of life were not exclusively evident in the history of thought of the western world (for more, see, for instance, Ronald Glassman (2019).
3. For more on the politics of such ‘critical times’ and ‘times of ...’ tropes and of what phenomena they single out as conspicuous challenges, see Papastephanou (2023b).
4. To Aristotle, *koinonia* [κοινωνία] represents the ontological model by which he understands human relationship. In his *Politics*, he uses the term to designate a community of any size, from a single family to a *polis* (city or city-state).

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