The Democratic Paideia Project: Beginnings of an Emancipatory Paideia for Today

DAVID GABBARD & KAREN ANIJAR APPLETON

In a time in which Communist regimes have been rightly discredited and yet alternatives to neoliberal capitalist societies are unwisely dismissed, I defend the fundamental claim of Marxist theory: There must be countervailing forces that defend people's needs against the brutality of profit-driven capitalism. Unfortunately, Marxists have not envisioned how those countervailing forces could be democratic ones.

Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*[1]

As members of the Marxian Analysis of Schools, Society, and Education Special Interest Group (MASSES) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), we recognize the powerful yet discomforting truth in Dr. West's remarks. We have, indeed, failed to envision democratic countervailing forces to defend people's needs and advance their interests against the contemporary forces of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. In fact, as Gabbard has argued elsewhere, we frequently berate ourselves for this failure but never move to rectify it. Over and over again, we listen to each other call for a "language of possibility," yet none of us seems brave enough to put one forward. The Inclusive Democracy Project, as outlined by Fotopoulos in *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*[2] and discussed extensively by scholars and activists associated with *Democracy & Nature* and *The International Journal for Inclusive Democracy,* might provide us with that language.

The Inclusive Democracy Project

Before we begin our considerations of the Inclusive Democracy Project, we return to Cornel West and his astute observation in *Democracy Matters* that "the deep democratic tradition did not begin in America and we have no monopoly on its promise... The first grand democratic experiment [began] in Athens."[3]

West's observation serves us well here, because it is precisely within those ancient Greek traditions that Fotopoulos locates the conceptual foundations for constructing the Inclusive Democracy Project. "Few words," he argues, "apart perhaps from socialism, have been so widely abused...as the word 'democracy.' Much of this abuse stems from what he

identifies as the "current practice of adding several qualifying adjectives to the term democracy, which serves only to confuse "the meaning of it and [create] the impression that several forms of democracy exist."[4] Literally translated from the Greek, democracy means the rule of the *demos* (the people). Hence, Fotopoulos asserts "there is only one form of democracy at the political level, that is, the direct exercise of sovereignty by the people themselves, a form of societal institution which rejects any form of 'ruling' and institutionalizes the equal sharing of political power among all citizens."[5] In the Athenian experiment, of course, the hierarchical social structure excluded women, immigrants, and slaves from political participation in the ecclesia. Nevertheless, Athenian democracy provides us with "the first historical example of the identification of the sovereign with those exercising sovereignty."[6] Furthermore, as Fotopoulos convincingly argues, we should attribute the collapse of Athenian democracy not to any "innate weakness of direct democracy, but to its failure to become an inclusive democracy and in particular to the fact that the political equality which the Athenian democracy had established for its citizens was, in the last instance, founded on economic inequality."[7]

An inclusive democracy demands more than political democracy. Democracy must extend across the entire public realm; that is, "any area of human activity where decisions can be taken collectively and democratically."[8] This includes, in addition to political democracy [9]: economic democracy[10], social democracy,[11] and ecological democracy[12]. Here we locate the inclusive nature of the Inclusive Democracy Project, the aim of which is to establish democracy as our *dominant social paradigm*. By dominant social paradigm, Fotopoulos means "the system of beliefs, ideas and the corresponding values which are dominant (or tend to become dominant) in a particular society at a particular moment of its history, as most consistent with the existing political, economic and social institutions" [13] This consistency serves as a "fundamental precondition" for reproducing any social order, and it demands that individuals internalize the beliefs, ideas, and values corresponding to the institutional arrangements. In the case of an inclusive democracy, individuals would be required to develop a democratic consciousness by internalizing the beliefs, ideas, and values appropriate for political citizenship, economic citizenship, social citizenship, and cultural citizenship. In all four cases, Fotopoulos explains, the demands of inclusive democracy dictate a 'participatory' conception of active citizenship, like the one implied by the work of Hannah Arendt. In this conception, 'Political activity is not a means to an end, but an end in itself; one does not engage in political activity simply to promote one's welfare but to realize the principles intrinsic to political life, such as freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, courage, and excellence.'"[14]

The responsibility of cultivating the democratic consciousness requisite to this conception of citizenship falls to *paideia*. As Fotopoulos points out, "*paideia* is not just education but character development and a well-rounded education in knowledge and skills, i.e. the education of the individual as citizen, which can 'only give valuable, substantive content to the "public space".'"[15] Quoting Hansen on "the crucial role of *paideia*," Fotopoulos adds

> [T]o the Greek way of thinking, it was the political institutions that shaped the 'democratic man' and the 'democratic life', not vice versa: the institutions of the polis *educated and moulded the lives of citizens, and to have the best life you must have the best institutions and a system of education conforming with the institutions* (emphasis in the original).[16]

Introducing The Democratic *Paideia* Project

We find ourselves prone to agreeing with Fotopoulos that *paideia* can only be authentically realized within the context of a genuinely inclusive democracy. A *democratic paideia* would seek to advance the same values upon which it is grounded: *autonomy and community.* These values, however, are radically incommensurable with the dominant social paradigm of our present era and utterly incompatible with the institutional framework of the market economy and representative 'democracy'-- aptly characterized by Castoriadis as 'liberal oligarchy'. Any effort to establish *paideia* within today's schools would generate a radical inconsistency within the present institutional framework, threatening the elites' power to reproduce themselves and the heteronomous social relations upon which they are based.

This brings us to crux of our problem. What must we do to shift from one dominant social paradigm (the market) to another (inclusive democracy)? In response to this question, Fotopoulos puts forward a *strategy of confederal inclusive democracy* as a transitional politics that would engage "increasing numbers of people in a new kind of politics and the parallel shifting of economic resources (labour, capital, land) away from the market economy" with the aim of creating "changes in the institutional framework and value systems that, after a period of tension between the new institutions and the state, would, at some stage, replace the market economy, statist democracy, as well as the social paradigm 'justifying' them, with an inclusive democracy and a new democratic paradigm respectively."[17]

In keeping with the value of community inherent within the *Inclusive Democracy Project*, implementing this strategy begins with creating a popular base of political power at the local level. Individuals committed to the principles of inclusive democracy must enter the political arena as candidates in local elections. In our view, this first step in transitional politics opens the door for an emancipatory education guided by the principles of paideia. As Mortimer Adler pointed out repeatedly in his writings, *paideia* defines education as a lifelong process. "Schooling," as he explained, represents merely the "preparatory stage; it forms the habit of learning and provides the means for continuing to learn after all schooling is completed."[18] The campaigns of Inclusive Democracy candidates would create opportunities for emancipatory education, aimed at disrupting the socialization process through which people have internalized the ideas, beliefs, and values of the market. That would include, of course, candidates running for election to local school boards as part of a *Democratic Paideia Project* to educate local community members on the principles and practices of *paideia* with the aim of creating popular support for implementing those same principles and practices in local schools.

Toward that end, we propose establishing the *Democratic Paideia Project* as part of the larger *Inclusive Democracy Project* advanced through this journal. Insofar as *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* functions to develop the theoretical ends and strategic means for establishing the inclusive democracy project as a new dominant social paradigm, we believe it should include a section that would allow theorists such as ourselves to build upon the theoretical and practical foundations of *paideia*. The popular base of support for the *Inclusive Democracy Project* could draw upon these resources to inform their work in and around schools, including their work on school boards and in local curriculum development initiatives.

While we embrace Cornel West's earlier cited acknowledgement that "the deep democratic tradition did not begin in America and we have no monopoly on its promise," much of our work would focus on addressing the peculiarities of the American context. This would not mean, of course, that our theoretical development of *paideia* would carry no relevance for non-Americans. Concurrently, however, we propose working with the editors of the journal to solicit contributions from democratic educational theorists around the world interested in addressing *paideia* from the perspective of their own national context and democratic traditions.

Rethinking Adler

West claims that [d]emocracy is always a movement of an energized public to make elites responsible–it is at its core and most basic foundation the taking back of one's power in face of the misuse of elite power. In this sense, democracy is more a verb than a noun–it is more a dynamic striving and collective movement than a static order or stationary status quo. Democracy is not just a system of governance, as we tend to think of it, but a cultural way of being. This is where the voices of our great democratic truth tellers come in.[19] While we would agree that democracy is "more a verb than a noun," and that it does indeed signifiy both a "cultural way of being" and a "system of governance," we challenge West's view that the 'dynamic striving and collective movement" of democracy be conceptualized as merely making "elites responsible." The realization of democracy demands nothing short of the elimination of oligarchy.Although it is true that democracy is a dynamic striving (which however crucially depends on an alternative genuinely democratic institutional framework-- something that West, like Mouffe and supporters of 'radical democracy' tend to ignore taking for granted liberal 'democracy') we would not agree with his description of a democratic movement since it takes for granted the existence of elites and gives the impression that the aim of such a movement is to challenge the misuse of elite power rather than the overthrow of elites and their power—as is the ID project's aim.

Though it will surprise the ears of our colleagues in MASSES, we must recognize Mortimer Adler as one of the greatest "democratic truth tellers" of the 20th century. Writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and moved by the hard fought victories claimed by the feminist and civil rights movements, he declared "we are on the verge of a new era in our national life." As the result of these victories, he believed, "democracy has come into its own for the first time in this century… Not until this century have we conferred the high office of enfranchised citizenship on all our people, regardless of sex, race, or ethnic origin." Fueled by this optimism and inspired by John Dewey's *Education and Democracy*, Adler believed "[t]he long-needed educational reform for which this country is last ready will be a turning point toward that era." The educational reform he advanced, of course, was *paideia*.

With Adler, we recognize the significant gains made by the civil rights and feminist movements in terms of breaking down the racist and sexist elements of the American market system and representative democracy. However, those reforms did not transform the dominant social paradigm. They also left intact the market-imposed, class-based oligarchy that continues to prohibit the equal distribution of political and economic power among all citizens. Moreover, Adler assumed a limited – rights-based – conception of democracy that further limited his conception of *paideia*. Hence, although we find many truths in his writings that have gone neglected over the past twenty-years, we view them as

only partial truths that demand a more critical view of the flaws within the American, or any, system of representative democracy and the role of the market in undermining genuine democracy as defined under the *Inclusive Democracy Project.*

In 1979, Adler, then Chairman of the Board of Editors for Encyclopaedia Britannica, worked with other educators to form the Paideia Group. Largely through the publication of three books ,(*Paideia Proposal* [1982], *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* [1983], and *The Paideia Program* [1984]), this group generated tremendous public interest in *paideia.* This interest led Adler, in 1985, to form Paideia Associates to provide training to people wanting to establish *paideia* programs in their local schools. Though Adler died in 2001, that work continues today at the National Paideia Center at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. To date, that Center helps support 30 *paideia* schools in 10 states throughout the US.

Again, inspired by John Dewey's *Education and Democracy*, Adler wrote *The Paideia Proposal* as an educational manifesto. "[U]niversal suffrage and universal schooling," he believed, "are inextricably bound together." The one without the other is a perilous delusion."[20] For all of his optimism, Adler was also a realist in the sense that he recognized the "disastrous consequences' of our "continued failure to fulfill the educational obligations of a democracy. We are all victims," he wrote, "of a school system that has gone only half way along the road to realize the promise of democracy."[21]

Though many overlook this, there are two dimensions to Adler's criticism that our school system "has gone only half way along the road to realize the promise of democracy." We believe there is a tendency to associate this criticism solely with his egalitarian commitments expressed in his frequently cited claim that "a democratic society must provide equal educational opportunity not only by giving to all its children the same quantity of public education –the same number of years in school – but also by making sure to give them all, with no exceptions, the same quality of education." The second dimension of this criticism, which is frequently overlooked, addresses the lack of quality found in contemporary schooling. First, Adler rejected the specialization and narrow vocationalism that he saw in schools. On one hand, he rejected this on the grounds that it created a multi-track educational system premised on the undemocratic prejudice that "many of the nation's children are not fully educable. Trainable for one or another job, perhaps, but not educable for the duties of self-governing citizenship and for the enjoyment of things of the mind and spirit that are essential to a good human life."[22] On the other hand, he rejected it on the deeper grounds that humanity's lack of specialized instinctual patterns of behavior do not suit us for specialized schooling. Second, Adler criticized schooling's over-reliance on tests. "Examinations," in his view, "are passed by regurgitation of what is remembered from lectures and textbooks. Most of the remembered information is subsequently forgotten; and the student's mind is no better than it was at the beginning."[23] In what could be viewed as a most stinging indictment of today's schools' focus on high stakes testing and accountability schemes, Adler's further condemnation of tests is worth quoting at length:

> [T]hey [students] may be memorizing machines, able to pass quizzes or examinations. But probe their minds and you will find that what they know by memory, they do not understand. They have spent hours in classrooms where they were talked at, where they recited and took notes, plus hours of homework poring over textbooks, extracting facts to commit to memory. But

when have their minds been addressed, in what connection have they been called upon to think for themselves, to respond to important questions and to raise them themselves, to pursue an argument, to defend a point of view, to understand its opposite, to weigh alternatives? There is little joy in most of the learning they are now compelled to do. Too much of it is make believe, in which neither teacher nor pupil can take a lively interest. Without some joy in learning—a joy that arises from hard work well done and from the participation of one's mind in a common task — basic schooling cannot initiate the young into the life of learning, let alone give them the skill and the incentive to engage in it further.[24]

We should not mistake Adler for some educational romantic, however. In fact, one of the strengths of Adler's work as a useful starting point from which to begin theorizing a radically democratic *paideia* lies in his outline of three mutually reinforcing modes of teaching and learning. For Adler, schooling must begin with *knowledge acquisition* from three areas of subject matter:

1. Language, Literature, & Fine Arts
2. Mathematics and Natural Sciences
3. History, Geography, and Social Sciences

The mode of teaching appropriate to the acquisition of knowledge he identified as *didactic instruction.* Some part of the time spent in school, particularly in the early years, must be dedicated to knowledge acquisition. In order to meet what he describes as the three objectives of three main objectives of schooling 1) personal (mental, moral, and spiritual) growth/self-improvement, 2) the individual's role as an enfranchised citizen of this republic, and 3) the adult's need to earn a living, there are simply things that one must know. In keeping with the premium that *inclusive democracy* places on the value of *community*, Adler argued that "[f]or mutual understanding and responsible debate among the citizens of a democratic community, and for differences to be aired and resolved, citizens must be able to communicate with one another in a common language. 'Language' in this context involves a common vocabulary of ideas."[25]

None of the three objectives of schooling can be achieved, however, solely through knowledge acquisition. Adler's model also demands *skill development* in three primary areas:

1. Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening
2. Calculating, Problem-Solving, Observing, Measuring, and Estimating
3. Exercising Critical Judgment

Skills, he contends, are best taught by means of *intellectual coaching*, exercises, and supervised practiced.

Together, knowledge acquisition and skill development lay the foundation for the lifelong learning that is crucial for meeting the three objectives of schooling. Fotopoulos emphasizes these foundations when describing *paideia* not only *as civic schooling* but also as *personal training* playing a vital role in developing students' capacity to learn. However, both these two aims of paideia i.e *paideia as civic schooling*, cultivating students' capacity for "self-reflective activity and deliberation" on the path to *autonomy*, and paedeia as

personal training presuppose an *enlargement of understanding through Socratic questioning*.

Socratic questioning, for Adler, occurs in seminars that are not restricted to secondary schools, but should begin during the earliest stages of schooling. It is significant to note that the relationship between teachers and students shifts across each of three modes of teaching and learning. In knowledge acquisition activities, where teachers engage in didactic teaching, their relationship to students differs from the relationship during skills development. Likewise, the relationship changes again with the introduction of Socratic questioning in seminars. In the first two modes of teaching and learning, the authority of teachers stems from their superior knowledge (their knowledge of *what* and *how*). In the seminar setting, however, they derive their authority from superiority as learners. For, in this role, teachers play the role of co-learners, modeling the practices of Socratic questioning. This does not abdicate teachers of their authority derived from the superiority of their knowledge of the materials; it only adds another layer of responsibility for teachers to exercise that authority wisely, so as not to undermine students' growth as self-reflective, deliberative and autonomous thinkers. Adler also refers to this mode of teaching as *maieutic*, "because it helps the student bring ideas to birth," stimulating "the imagination and intellect by awakening the creative and inquisitive powers."

The most contentious issue in Adler's work concerns the materials chosen for discussion in his Socratic seminars. Most broadly stated, these material should include books (not textbooks) as well as other products of human artistry: music, art, plays, and productions in dance, film, or television. Through studying and discussing these works, focusing particularly on the ideas and values they contain or express, students sharpen their ability to "think clearly, critically, and reflectively." It also introduces them to the fundamental ideas and values "underlying our form of government and the institutions of our society." Again, the focus for Adler remains on preparing individuals for active and intelligent citizenship.

The contentiousness of the issue arrives when Adler describes these works as the "Great Books" or "Great Works of Human Artistry" and then submits that what makes these books great is the fact that they contain the "Great Ideas" that have perplexed human beings throughout history but which remain central to the discussion of civic matters. In our view, the selection of materials for Socratic dialogue appropriate to a democratic *paideia*, particularly during the stages of *emancipatory education* prior to the successful transition to an authentically inclusive democracy demands more discerning criteria to be determined by individuals in their lived cultural and historical contexts.

In the American cultural and historical context, we believe that the materials selected for discussion and Socratic questioning must enable our citizens to wrestle with what Cornel West identifies as making the "American democratic experiment … unique in human history." What makes us unique, West claims, is not the widely held and arrogant assumption that somehow "we are God's chosen people to lead the world." Rather, the American democratic experiment is unique in human history "because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and and imperial roots of our democratic project" and "because of our denial of the antidemocratic foundation stones of American democracy. No other democratic nation," West adds, revels so blatantly in such self-deceptive innocence, such self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the night-side of its own history. This sentimental flight from history–or adolescent escape from painful truths about ourselves–

means that even as we grow old, grow big, and grow powerful, we have yet to grow up."[26]

Ultimately, in our view, for Americans to "grow up," they must confront the painful truth that their nation is not and never has been a democratic society. Emancipation starts from this realization and none other. And it is from this realization that a Democratic Paideia Project must begin its rethinking of Adler without rejecting him outright.

---

[1] C. West, *The Cornel West Reader*, (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 1999), p. 211.

[2] T. Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy: The Crisis of the Growth Economy and the Need for a New Liberatory Project* (London: Cassell, 1997)

[3] C. West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

[4] T. Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*, p. 175.

[5] Ibid, pp. 175-176.

[6] Ibid, p. 185.

[7] Ibid, p. 186.

[8] Ibid, p. 206.

[9] See Ibid, pp. 207-209.

[10] See Ibid, pp. 209-211.

[11] See Ibid, pp. 211-213.

[12] See Ibid, pp. 213-216.

[13] T. Fotopoulos, "From (mis)education to *Paideia*" (in this issue), p. 1.

[14] Ibid, pp. 217-218, citing M.P. d'Entreves, 'Hannah Arendt and the idea of citizenship' in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, Chantal Mouffe (ed.) (London: Verson, 1992, 1995), p. 154.

[15] Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy*, p. 209.

[16] Ibid, citing M. H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, p. 63.

[17] Ibid, p. 282. see also T. Fotopoulos, "Transitional strategies and the Inclusive Democracy project", *Democracy & Nature*, Volume 8 Number 1, March 2002.

[18] M. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: MacMillan, 1982). p.10.

[19] C. West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 68.

[20] M. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* . p. 3.

[21] Ibid, p. 4.

[22] Ibid, p. 7.

[23] M. Adler, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*, (New York: MacMillan, 1983), p. 24.

[24] M. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (1982). pp. 31-32.

[25] Ibid, pp. 30-31.

[26] C. West, *Democracy Matters*, p. 41.