

## Civic education reconsidered.(School Report, part 3)

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**The revival of the movement in favor of civic education is threatening the existence of the anticivic orthodoxy that has prevailed for years in American schools. Proponents of civic education, backed by an intellectual movement called the newer Left, are trying to inculcate in students an appreciation for the principles of the country's political system. The campaign for civic education, however, is based on a false premise because of its unitary concept of the civic idea. A sound civic education should instead embrace a pluralist approach.**

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We are approaching the end of an era in educational philosophy. From the middle of the 1960s until today, the reigning orthodoxy among educational theorists has been one of hostility to civic education, understood as the attempt to inculcate an appreciation for the principles of America's political system. Those espousing this orthodoxy rarely, of course, call it an anticivic idea. They have preferred instead to advance their views under more attractive labels, such as humanitarianism (where an attachment to the nation, especially one's own nation, is considered repugnant), individualism (where the cultivation of any political orthodoxy is regarded as a violation of each individual's right to fashion his or her own moral hierarchy), or, most recently and elaborately, multiculturalism (where people are said to belong authentically only to ethnic, racial, or sexual groups, not to anything as synthetic as the "Eurocentric" ideas of the American political system). Each of these theoretical justifications rests nicely on a positive standard - humanity, self, or culture - but the real driving force behind them has been the desire to eliminate certain dark tendencies thought to be encouraged by American civic education: imperialism (especially as it was manifested during the Vietnam War and the Cold War), repression, and racism and sexism.

The anticivic orthodoxy has thus been anything but antipolitical. An outgrowth of the revolutionary program of the New Left of the 1960s, it sought initially to further that movement's general aims. If the orthodoxy has lost a bit of its ideological edge today, it is because political conditions have changed and because a new generation of educational theorists is now naive and earnest enough to believe in such things as "values clarification training" and "cultural studies" as ends in themselves. But the political connection of these educational programs to the Left, even if slightly attenuated, still lies just beneath the surface.

### Collapse of an orthodoxy

This anticivic orthodoxy is now under siege. It was attacked first, as one would have expected, from the conservative side. Lacking a solid base inside the intellectual and educational establishments, conservatives took their case into the broader arena of politics.

Revelations of our schools' indifference or hostility to civic education were part of President Reagan's two presidential campaigns, and they became a major preoccupation of the Department of Education under William Bennett. At the state and local levels, conservatives mobilized to bring pressure on school boards to restore the civic idea. Most important, an unknown soldier in the conservative army coined the term "political correctness," which became a mighty polemical weapon, helping to expose the theoretical hegemony of the anticivic position.

Yet, as much as conservative opposition influenced public opinion, it could not seriously breach the citadel of intellectual thought. That could only come from within. As the consequences of the anticivic position began to become evident, a few intellectuals on the left courageously broke ranks to join the assault. One of the earliest, most notable, and most eloquent was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose *The Disuniting of America*, in 1992, warned against the growing number of educators who "contend that a main objective of public education should be the protection, strengthening, celebration, and perpetuation" of different ethnic and racial identities. This kind of overheated multiculturalism - the "cult of ethnicity," as Schlesinger called it - could destroy the nation.

The way was now open for the emergence of a major intellectual movement: a "newer Left," which has seemed at times to reserve its greatest passion not for attacking the Right but for assailing the New Left. Proponents of this movement have made the restoration of civic education one of their major goals, whether in the form of Paul Berman's plea for a renewed "religion of democracy" or Michael Lind's call for a new "liberal nationalism." The newer Left recently received the blessing of one of America's most celebrated philosophers, Richard Rorty, who begins his recent book, *Achieving Our Country*, with the provocative observation that "national pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals." This is hardly the language of the Left of the 1960s. Rather than abandoning the civic idea as the New Left had done, Rorty maintains that the goal of the Left should be to recapture it. He calls for a creative melding of Walt Whitman and John Dewey which will enable the Left to tell a new "story" of the nation's past and to forge a new dream of its future. Others

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in this movement invoke different figures as spiritual ancestors - Herbert Croly and even Alexander Hamilton have found renewed favor - but with the same aim in mind: to return the Left to an older way of thinking in favor of a central democratic version of the civic idea.

It will be some time, of course, before civic education again becomes the norm in American schooling. In contrast to the kind of tight command structures that prevail within intellectual ranks in many European countries, where the word of a leading thinker is quickly disseminated and acted upon, American intellectual life is characterized by weak lines of communication. Years can pass before the second and third tier intellectuals - the NCOs and privates, as it were, of the intellectual armies - receive their marching orders. For the moment, therefore, partisans of the anticivic orthodoxy in America continue to fight on, blithely unaware that a portion of their general staff has deserted the cause. Indeed, they are still winning battles: Multiculturalist forces have more say than ever on what is allowed in textbooks or what is said in classrooms.

Nevertheless, barring some unforeseen event, the anticivic orthodoxy will eventually collapse under the combined assault of the Left and Right. What the new world will look like, however, is another matter. With intellectuals on both sides now embracing the cause of civic education, the stakes involved in controlling this idea have risen dramatically. Each group nurses hope, but is moved by fear. The Left is aware that it is behind. As much as a change of conviction, it has been the Left's sober realization that its indifference to the civic idea was, in Rorty's words, a "political disaster" that has spurred a change of strategy. Intellectuals on the left are haunted today by the thought that they might awaken to find a nation of school children compelled to learn their lessons from a new version of McGuffey's Reader or, worse, from the ever-expanding library of Bennett's books on virtue.

For their part, today's conservative intellectuals are suddenly discomfited by the realization that they no longer have sole ownership of the idea of civic education. Not quite knowing how to react to this new situation, they have alternated between allowing themselves to be seduced by any kind of appeal to civic education, including some of the raw bones thrown their way by communitarians and proponents of the newer Left, and then complaining bitterly that their platform has been stolen from them. And conservatives have a nightmare of their own: Legions of school children, dressed in federally designed school uniforms, deployed in mass formation waving colorful banners warning of the dangers of second-hand smoke and of global warming. Beyond these partisan concerns, a few educators also worry that in a looming battle over civic education, where each side may try to outbid the other in

its commitment to an American "narrative," the students' critical spirit might be lost; or they worry that an American canon will be indiscriminately expanded at the expense of what little remains in our schools of "classical" studies, with the last remnants of Homer and Shakespeare sacrificed to Whitman and Vidal.

### Perspectives on the civic

Substantial as these apprehensions about a renewal of civic education may be, there is nonetheless an emerging consensus that it would be a mistake to allow any incidental reservations to undermine the struggle against the anticivic orthodoxy. A nation that has abandoned civic education and cultivated a disdain for its own principles is clearly in trouble. So say conservative and liberal intellectuals. Better some kind of civic education, the thinking seems to go, than none at all. The consensus is perfectly reflected in the exquisitely balanced Council on Civil Society, a bipartisan group of academics, theologians, and politicians that includes Senators Joseph Lieberman and Dan Coats and Professors Cornel West and James Q. Wilson. It recently called for schools to rededicate themselves to "transmitting to students a knowledge of their country's constitutional heritage, an understanding of what constitutes good citizenship, and an appreciation of their society's common civic faith and shared moral philosophy."

Still, it would be unwise to permit consensus on an overall end to blunt criticism of the way to achieve it. The campaign for civic education, we believe, is being waged on a faulty premise. It assumes, apparently without much consideration, that the only way to defeat the anticivic orthodoxy is to replace it with an idea - meaning a single plan or program of study or curricula - of what civic education should be. The alternative to none, in this view, is one. Left and Right disagree on what this idea should be, but each seeks a unitary vision. This way of thinking excludes another approach - one that affirms that a dialogue among different conceptions of the American civic idea is the best way to promote sound civic education. In a pluralist understanding, the preferred alternative to none is several. As long as the civic idea is taken seriously, and as long as the basic character of the political order is respected, the nation may be better served by civic education from a variety of perspectives.

These perspectives date from the American colonial experience and have been developed and maintained by different kinds of schools, including the schools of various Protestant denominations, Catholic schools, military academies, Friends schools, as well as the different secular and government systems. The Protestant tradition in America grew out of the same European Enlightenment

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ideas as the nation itself. From the beginning, Protestants have emphasized education so that individuals could learn to read the Bible for themselves and to reason independently about God. This tradition espouses individualism, self-reliance and hard work, public service, and respect for legitimate authority. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Noah Webster captured the Protestant belief that good Christians make good citizens:

The scriptures ... furnish the best principles of civil liberty, and the most effectual support of republican government. They teach the true principles of that equality of rights which belongs to every one of the human family but only in consistency with a strict subordination to the magistrate and the law.

The Catholic contribution to the American civic tradition has also been longstanding and significant. Catholic educators have consistently held that religious teachings are not only compatible with civic education but complement it in important ways. They have challenged what John Courtney Murray has called the "contrived dilemma wherein one is confronted with the stark choice of flag or cross, fatherland or faith, Caesar, or God." Catholics' more communitarian view of the citizen's role in society - derived from Aquinas and the tradition of natural-right philosophy - has served as a valuable counterweight to modern liberalism's emphasis on the individual. Catholic education encourages discipline, egalitarianism, concern for the less fortunate, and community service. As Pope John Paul II has said, "Catholic education serves the future of all Americans, by teaching and communicating the very virtues on which American democracy rests."

Military schools, meanwhile, stress the inculcation of duty, loyalty, respect for authority, patriotism, discipline, honor, and leadership. These "private" schools are at their very core dedicated to the idea of service in defense of public principles and the state. Preparing the individual for the ultimate sacrifice, they encourage the ultimate sense of civic duty. Quaker schools have as their guiding principles social responsibility, consensus building, tolerance, equality, and simplicity. They emphasize the importance of individual conscience and the peaceful resolution of disputes. The small number of Quaker schools ensures that their pacifism - which like militarism could pose difficulties if it dominated society at large - remains but one voice among many.

Pluralism describes an arrangement or a process, and there is nothing in a pluralist view per se that assures the reasonable content of the different positions, much less a satisfactory outcome to any dialogue. If each of the positions is foolish and inadequate, it is hard to see how

much is gained by having many of them. Thus pluralism must not come to mean a blind trust in the process; debates about better and worse plans must continue. Nor, from a different angle, is pluralism a guarantee that disagreements will not become overheated, leading to efforts by some to suppress their rivals. Such in fact has often been the case with American history; during most periods, pluralism better describes the reality of disagreement than an ideal accepted by the different parties. A defense of pluralism acknowledges these shortcomings and flaws, but it maintains nonetheless that, as a general way of structuring matters, far more is to be gained than lost in the ongoing existence of, and even the competition among, different views.

Private or public?

The issues at stake in the conflict between a unitary and a pluralist approach to civic education go well beyond current policy debates about vouchers to the very idea of how the "civic" should operate in American education and political life. These questions, nevertheless, have a bearing on discussions of the place of private - or, as we shall say, nongovernment - education in our society, as well as on the degree of curricular centralization and hierarchy in government education.

Since the beginning of the present decade, conservatives have warmed to support of nongovernment schools but without defending the benefits of civic pluralism. They argue that nongovernment schools can provide what government schools sometimes have failed to offer: a sound education, including a sound civic education. But conservatives continue to speak of a common civic idea that would be taught in the private, as well as in the public, schools. Intellectuals on the left have become, if anything, more insistent on a unitary vision of civic education. This position fits better with their renewed emphasis on a national civic idea, which they also connect with support for the public school system. Benjamin Barber has expressed this sentiment perfectly in his recent book, *A Passion for Democracy*:

Public schools are not merely schools for the public, but schools of publicness; institutions where we learn what it means to be a public and start down the road toward common national and civic identity.... Without citizens, democracy is a hollow shell. Without public schools, there can be no citizens.

Claims of this kind build on the logic of the unitary idea and employ with full force a rhetoric of the "common" and the "civic." Civic education, in this view, takes place only in the common school or, at any rate, only according to a commonly conceived curriculum. Nongovernment schools

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are seen if not as illegitimate then as representing a withdrawal from the civic enterprise. Surprisingly, many theorists of political liberalism accept the spirit of this argument, even if they reject the conclusion. They do not deny that sending one's children to nongovernment schools withdraws them from civic life but argue that it is a freedom that a liberal society must permit because of liberalism's commitment to the private rights of belief and association. Permitting withdrawals constitutes, in this liberal view, the core meaning of "pluralism" in the educational sphere. The civic here is connected to the public and the governmental, while rights and pluralism are linked to the private. As Eamonn Callan has expressed this view in his recent book, *Creating Citizens: Public Education and Liberal Democracy*, the state "must permit communities of like-minded citizens to create educational institutions that reflect their distinctive way of life," although this "accommodation to pluralism" creates the dilemma of producing "alienation from the political culture of the larger society."

Civic pluralism rests on a different idea. It is a pluralism not of withdrawal from civic life but of participation in it. No one denies that a liberal society should allow people to pursue their "distinctive way of life" as a matter of right. But, while this is a necessary attribute of a liberal society, it may not be an adequate characterization of it. There is a difference between a requirement of a system and its actual animating spirit. Too many theorists miss the point by concentrating all their energies on the theoretical and legal possibilities of the system, forgetting to describe a nation's historical and sociological realities.

In the case of education in America, it is false to claim that the primary reason for the exercise of a "private" right of association has been to opt out of civic life. Quite to the contrary. Rights have usually been exercised to express different conceptions of the civic idea and to articulate a view of the American liberal democratic idea. Students who attend nongovernment schools today are thus not being taught to withdraw from civic life but to practice it in a certain way. To the extent that there has been a withdrawal from the civic in modern America, it has been encouraged far more by government school systems, where the anticivic orthodoxy has been strongest, than by nongovernment systems. In fact, many parents who have removed their children from government schools have done so to re-attach them to a civic idea.

### Diversity versus pluralism

Civic education is a slippery concept that can be used in many ways, which is why many avoid trying to define it. It can be conceived in a very broad or a fairly narrow sense, but in modern liberal democracies, it has generally been

thought to include the following three components. The first is the transmission of the knowledge and mores needed to create responsible and productive members of society. In this sense, civic education overlaps with moral education. Moral values are learned from a school's formal curriculum, but even more from its general ethos, including the examples set by teachers, coaches, and school administrators.

The second component of civic education is the teaching of specific skills, dispositions, and information helpful to performing the tasks of being a citizen in the strict public sense - voting, obeying the laws, paying taxes, and participating on juries and in politics. This part is the heart of curricular instruction in civics and is often supplemented through student involvement in community service ("service learning") and student government. A third, and often the most controversial part of civic education, is the attempt to foster an attachment to the nation's principles and institutions as objects worthy of respect, devotion, and sacrifice. This attachment can be cultivated by appeals to emotion and "prejudice," which is the approach emphasized in some nations. But it can also be achieved through reasoned assent within a critical spirit, which has generally been the method stressed in America.

Why then has the campaign for renewed civic education embraced a unitary, rather than a plural, conception of the civic idea? Political causes often define themselves - or allow themselves to be defined - by what they oppose, which today means chiefly multiculturalism and its goal of "diversity" (a term that reminds one of pluralism). Diversity, it is argued, produces disunity and opens America to the prospect of feuding tribes lacking any common bond. Having defined the problem in this way, the natural tendency is to place a premium on unity and to favor measures that promote a common experience. In this climate, pluralism sounds like the problem, not the solution.

Closer examination, however, makes clear that it is a mistake to equate "diversity" with "pluralism." Diversity proclaims that an individual's social identity is to be located not in the nation's guiding principles but in one or another of its so-called cultural groups; this way of thinking denies a distinctive American civic idea. Pluralism, by contrast, refers to the different expressions and understandings of the American civic idea. It is true that pluralism, in some instances, produces separateness. For example, it is mostly Catholics who attend Catholic schools and mostly Protestants who go to the different Protestant schools. But the nation has survived this separateness with the commitment of its various groups to the country intact and with their patriotism undiminished. A common sentiment need not always be produced by going through the very

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same experience. Moreover, the intolerance that existed among the different religious groups has largely given way today to their common effort to protect religious faith from the secularism of modern society. If there is a culture war in America today it is less one among the different believers in different faiths than between believers and nonbelievers.

The conflating of "diversity" and "pluralism" may have started out as an innocent mistake - one of those unfortunate confusions that the imprecise instrument of language sometimes produces when dealing with intellectual constructs and general ideas. But perpetuating this confusion is now, for some, a deliberate policy. It serves the aims of those anxious to promote a unitary vision of civic education and to undermine some of the attributes of pluralism, especially its openness to religious traditions. One should not forget that the most influential defender of a unitary vision in this century, John Dewey, was no friend of religious education and saw the progressive school teacher as the "prophet" of a new secular order. Dewey's heirs are hardly less enthusiastic in their ardor against religious faith. Defenders of pluralism thus have much to fear from the turn that modern discourse has taken. It would be the cruelest of ironies if the well-intentioned campaign against multiculturalism ended up claiming civic pluralism as one of its victims.

There is a further confusion in the meaning of "diversity" as it relates to educational policy. The word may make one think that multiculturalism favors pluralism in civic education - an impression strengthened by its critics' claim that it encourages each group to go its own way. But proponents of multicultural education do not in fact want black Americans to have one education in political matters, women another, and white Americans yet another. Instead, they have been pressing relentlessly for one version of the national narrative in which all students are instructed in the same painful story of Anglo-American hegemony and exploitation. Only after all receive this common foundation should each group repair to its particular concerns. Despite what the label suggests then, multiculturalism ultimately embraces a unitary, though anticivic, view of education - not a pluralistic one.

### Civic republicanism

Another reason why the renewed civic-education campaign has favored a unitary vision derives from the connotations of the term "civic," which means literally of the city. From this starting point, it becomes all too easy to slide down a slope that connects the civic to the "public" and the "common" and thence to the governmentally or publicly run. This tendency has been reinforced by combining "civic" with the term "republic" - in Latin *res*

*publica* or the realm of the public. Civic republicanism has been the central theme for nearly two decades of American historiography, where it has promoted a communitarian, as distinct from a liberal or rights-based, interpretation of the American tradition. For many of those calling for renewed civic education, civic republicanism has been interpreted to support vague notions of a national community and a unitary vision of American life.

Equating the civic with the state-run has also been encouraged by much recent political theory. The list of political theorists writing on civic education reads like a who's who of academia, and almost anyone who wants to address a major theme of democratic theory feels compelled today to put it in a discourse about education. The theoretical discussions of civic education usually begin from models that draw on the small republican political system as described by Aristotle and Montesquieu. Indeed, the very idea of "civic education" grows out of the connection with this kind of regime. As everything depends on education in a republican system - the city being formed more by the character of its citizens than formal institutions - it cannot be left to chance but must be legislated by the city. A parallel expression of the importance of education for the modern nation-state is found in the bold claim by Claus Offe that the citizen (or citizen-to-be) has three primary duties in the modern state: to pay taxes, to put his or her life on the line if called to do so for national defense, and to submit his or her mind to the state's version of civic education.

Discussions of the republican model would be useful for learning how to sustain a classical republic, no doubt. But the United States is not a republic in the classical sense - anything but. It does not share many of the basic characteristics of the classical republican states, which were small, homogeneous, and anticommercial. What is appropriate for the United States, therefore, cannot be derived a priori from anything said about them. The analysis of the kind of civic education America requires must rely on a more fundamental investigation that asks, first, what is appropriate to the character of our general type of political system (which is a liberal democracy)? And second - since general types never capture all that is essential about particular cases - what special arrangements and ways of thinking seem to "fit" here in the United States?

Unfortunately, it is just this kind of contextual and historical inquiry that too many theorists have been reluctant to undertake. They have preferred, instead, to dwell on general models of civic education and then, when turning to America, to concentrate on the two American thinkers who most favored civic republicanism and who laid the foundation for a secular, unitary vision of civic education:

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Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey. Both men made important contributions in the field of education, yet both were far - in Dewey's case very far indeed - from building on the actual spirit of what had historically guided American civic education.

Because of this republican influence, modern discourse on civic education tends to favor, even if inadvertently, a unitary, national, and (often) governmentally run conception of civic education. And even liberal theorists who want to distinguish themselves from pure republicans by defending the right to a nongovernment education come close to acceding to the republican claim that only the public and common make up the genuinely civic. "Free choice" may be an appropriate defense of nongovernment education, but it is silent on the question of how to promote civic education.

### Rise of the common school

If an alternative to republican discourse on the civic idea is to be discovered, it must be sought by supplementing the theoretical models with a more historical investigation of the practice of civic education in America. Such an investigation would demonstrate that the distinction between government and nongovernment schools in America, to which so much attention has been devoted, is inadequate for addressing the most significant issues about civic education. For that distinction is surely less important than the content of the different versions of the civic idea that have been put forward and the relationship that has existed among them.

There is no intrinsic meaning to a government or a nongovernment conception of civic education, and in fact, their different understandings have been far more contingent than one might think. Some conceptions of the civic idea that are found today in nongovernment school systems - above all, in certain Protestant schools - were once the core of much of the public education in America. Similarly, some parts of secular public education were first introduced by private schools. Finally, it is necessary to appreciate how "public" status has been used as an ideological or symbolic weapon in contests among competing ideas of education. Public or government status has sometimes been sought to claim a higher ground for a particular conception - a ground that is said to constitute the only true "civic" position, while all other positions are said to be noncivic. In practice, then, what is deemed the civic is not always the cause, but often merely the result, of its public status.

Throughout much of our history, the bright line that is drawn today between public and private systems simply did not exist. Outside of Massachusetts, which had a

highly developed public system from the 1840s, schools were often of a mixed character. Many schools were started and administered privately, usually by church denominations, but were funded in part or wholly from general taxes. Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, Catholic schools in a number of states still received public support, and, in many rural areas, the "public" school might have been denominational.

The evolution toward universal, public-funded education thus occurred in many parts of the United States before the advent of what is known as the common-school movement. That movement was unique, however, in its vision of a certain kind of education for certain civic purposes. The common-school movement, as a general ideological project, can trace its origins to Jefferson, but it was Horace Mann who led the efforts to make the common school a reality. The essential feature, for Mann, was that there should be a common experience dictated by the state. In his view, the child belonged to the state until such time as the child's - the future citizen's - proper development was ensured: Only "after the state shall have secured to all its children, that basis of knowledge and morality, which is indispensable to its own security ... may [children] be emancipated from its tutelage." From conviction and considerations of prudence, Mann chose to keep religion in the schools, as he thought it would promote sound morality. He hoped, however, to make its inclusion acceptable to all - or, at any rate, all Protestants - through nonsectarian religious instruction and Bible readings with minimal commentary.

Besides the goal of promoting an industrious, skilled, and educated populace, the common-school movement sought to achieve two slightly different, though overlapping, objectives of civic education. One was to provide a vast and sprawling nation, which included a substantial and growing immigrant population, with a common cultural foundation and a common attachment to the nation's principles. Education would serve as an instrument to build the nation and to "Americanize" the populace, in particular its non-native elements. The other objective was to inhibit the formation or perpetuation of traditions that resisted this Americanization, such as instruction in non-English languages or the teaching of doctrines indifferent to, or subversive of, the system's basic principles. Although a few such antidemocratic institutions may have existed, these hardly were significant enough to pose a major problem.

To the extent that serious problems arose, they were often of the common-school movement's own making. The attempt to enshrine the common school as the sole legitimate purveyor of the American civic idea had the effect of creating its own resistance. For those who

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believed that a fully religious education in their own faith was needed, and for those (mostly Catholic) who argued that submitting to readings from a Protestant version of the Bible was not really neutral, the "common-school" ideal proved unacceptable. Intended to unify, it proved divisive; and, in what amounted to a self-created spiral of conflict, the resistance of some to the public school orthodoxy was taken by others as proof of their anti-American inclinations.

However defensible, even laudable, the goal of Americanization may have been, the common-school movement crossed a fateful threshold when it sought to make the public school the self-proclaimed sole carrier of the civic idea. This error was compounded when some states (such as Oregon) passed laws banning private education, an exercise of authority that was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Pierce v. The Society of Sisters* (1925). While the *Pierce* decision placed limits on how far the common-school movement could utilize the state's coercive power, it did not - and could not - limit efforts to use the "public" status for the symbolic purpose of seeking ownership of the civic idea.

### Return of the faithful

The Catholic Church, with responsibility for administering the largest nongovernment school system, had the greatest stake in challenging the common school's pretensions. Prior to the widespread acceptance of the common school, Catholics had argued that education should be state-funded but run by "private" institutions - which, in practice, included mainly the different religious groups. In this view, the school should be an extension of the family, not a creation of the state. A diverse group of schools under private control did not mean that civic education would be ignored but that it would take place inside of, and in accord with, the traditions of each institution and its understanding of America. The civic idea would grow up from these different institutions, rather than be defined by the state.

However, after the common school achieved broad acceptance, the Church dropped its opposition to public schooling. Yet it refused to acquiesce to the common-school movement's overall ideology, insisting that nongovernment schools had a role to play in defining the civic idea. Responding to the excesses of the Americanization movement of the 1920s, which labeled the Catholic school "a destroyer of American patriotism," Catholics counterattacked with the rhetorical motto, "For God and Country." More importantly, they began to elaborate a philosophical argument in defense of pluralism. Emphasizing the long history and continuing reality of diversity in American education, they sought to elevate the idea of the right to a nongovernment education

into the broader notion of a positive civic contribution. In his widely acclaimed *We Hold These Truths*, John Courtney Murray articulated this view as one in which different conceptions of the civic idea, some "private" but all respectful of the nation's core principles, add strength to the nation. "The one civil society contains within its own unity the communities that are divided among themselves; but it does not seek to reduce to its own unity the differences that divide them. In a word, the pluralism remains as real as the unity." In a pluralistic society, he continued, the working out of such differences is in itself an exercise in civic virtue.

Common-school enthusiasts, however, continued to regard civic pluralism as a threat, proclaiming that genuine unity could only be achieved through a shared experience in the same system. Their objective remained universal enrollment in the common school, which was a goal that many, by the middle of this century, began to think was attainable. Transformed and modernized by progressive educational theory, a renewed common-school movement, after 1930, distanced itself from its de facto Protestant foundation and moved toward a stance of neutrality among the major religions. After mid century, the common school was winning more support, with urban systems like that of New York City coming closest to achieving the ideal of combining a heterogeneous student body with a high quality of instruction. This was the golden moment of the common school in America, and it was from the experience of this period that so many intellectuals acquired their devotion to it. Even the Catholic Church relented on its goal of "every Catholic in a Catholic school," and, pressed by financial burdens, it began to close down many of its schools.

The trend of increasing public school enrollment buoyed the partisans of the common school, giving them reason to think that their cause represented the wave of the future. But that trend has now ended. Participation in public schools, which had increased from 85 percent of elementary school children in 1960 to 90 percent in 1975, dropped in the mid 1980s a couple of points, where it remains today. Of course, this means that the vast preponderance of American children attend government schools. But, for the partisans of the common school, this is not enough, as anything less than progress toward the goal of universal enrollment marks a defeat. Can their old dream be revived? The common-school movement today sees a glimmer of hope in the new enthusiasm for civic education, which they seek to harness to their cause. But to do so, the movement - which lost its sense of the civic by embracing multiculturalism and individualism - must return to its roots, once again giving expression to a common civic idea. Hence Benjamin Barber's refrain: "Public schools are ... institutions where we learn what it

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means to be a public and start down the road toward common national and civic identity."

The reality, however, is that doubts about public schools have been growing in recent years. A direct concern with civic education has been only one factor in this development. For many parents, the primary issues are the security of their children, the overall quality of education, and the general absence of firm standards in the common-school environment - though these problems arguably are related to some of the same philosophic ideas that have promoted the anticivic orthodoxy. Other parents favor nongovernment schools for reasons that relate more specifically to religion. The full realization of the secular elements of Progressive educational theory and the federal courts' insistence on a strict separation of church and state have moved public schools away from their earlier stance of neutrality toward religion. As some Catholics once argued that they were pushed from the public schools because of the schools' Protestant foundation, so many of the faithful today think they are being pushed from public schools because of the schools' hostility to religion. Finally, with a possible fourth religious awakening underway in America, more Americans have come to believe that true character education must be explicitly religious.

Proponents of the common school today deplore this evolution toward nongovernment schooling and attack all proposals, from providing vouchers to offering tax incentives, which might encourage it. Appealing to fears inspired by the very doctrine of multiculturalism that the public schools have promoted, defenders of the common school express their concern about the increased "tribalism" that would result from more private education. Their concern is being echoed by many political theorists who, reasoning in the abstract from their republican-inspired models, point to the possibility of groups' exercising their autonomy to institute educational systems that ignore or subvert the civic idea. Evidence of this possibility is adduced from history, as in the great educational battles between the "republics" in Mexico and France and the Church. Or partisans of the common-school ideal point to certain rare cases where religious sects, such as the Hasidic, profess indifference to the things of the political world, or where a few all-white or all-black groups teach a separatism of the races and a superiority of their own race. The only way, it is said, to deal with these possible problems, and to assure a consensus, is for public authority to maintain control.

But reasoning from hypothetical cases or a handful of exceptions is no substitute for an inquiry into the real behavior of the overwhelming majority of America's various communities. These have shown not only that they

want to uphold the nation's founding principles but also that, given the opportunity to establish institutions, they have a real inducement to give expression to the civic project. The enormous amount of wealth and human energy that different communities have invested in cultivating a civic sense is amply illustrated in the network of nongovernment institutions of higher learning. None of this means, of course, that every and anything must be permitted. As the Court said in *Pierce*, states may require "certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship" to be taught and may ban instruction of doctrines "manifestly inimical to the public welfare." But there is all the difference in the world between a state that proscribes certain teachings and one that prescribes a single approach.

### Civic choice

The existence of nongovernment schools, each having a somewhat different perspective on America, only marks a crisis for civic education when seen from the perspective of those who equate the civic idea with a common vision acquired through a common experience in a common system. Such a view has overtones of both despotism and socialism: despotism because it demands one idea imposed by the state, and socialism because it regards the nation's children as a collective resource to be distributed by the government to obtain a collective good. A common educational experience, nonetheless, has some appeal. As a practical matter, however, the existing arrangement of public education does not come close to providing that experience. The socioeconomic distribution of America's population and the method of determining the boundary lines of public school districts guarantee that many children attend public schools that are relatively homogeneous along racial and class lines. Any plan to establish a truly common experience would require massive centralization, as well as a ban on opting out of the system. As for the nongovernment schools, they are - as the sociologist James Coleman has shown - much more diverse in terms of race and class than has been thought.

In the context of the current debate on education, the argument for a common experience represents little more than a rhetorical effort to capitalize on the growing enthusiasm for civic education and to attach the notion of the civic to the old argument for the supremacy of the common school. The principal alternative today to this position is represented in the school-choice movement. Although this movement has won some impressive legislative battles in certain states and cities, it has not fared as well in the war of ideas. Its very name, "school choice," conveys a demand to exercise a right, perhaps even a right of withdrawal, rather than of a full claim to participate in the articulation of the nation's public mission.



## Civic education reconsidered.(School Report, part 3)

The movement has based its positive case on the technical claim that it can give us better schools that will improve performance on proficiency tests. If true this would certainly be an important benefit. But it does not go to the heart of the matter, which is to make a renewed case for the pluralist understanding of how the civic sense should be defined and constructed, not only in education but throughout society.

The revival today of the idea of civic education is a healthy development, above all because it promises to undermine the anticivic orthodoxy that has prevailed in many of our schools over the past generation. But it contains the danger, already evident in much of the emerging debate, of shifting national thinking toward the notion that the civic must be single and public. This premise denies the history of American education, in which a sense of national unity has been promoted through the mutually reinforcing traditions of public and private schools. It also denies the genius of the American political system. Properly conceived, the civic ought to refer to a spirit of public concern and of public regard, not to one set of ideas defined by the government. In the final analysis, the real threat to American unity lies not in the existence of multiple civic ideals - even when they are engaged in an energetic and rancorous debate - but in the absence of civic engagement or in the standardization of the civic idea.

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