

A Different Kind of Politics: Educational Imperatives of Public Work

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In his Mandela Day Lecture in South Africa, on July 17, 2017, president Barack Obama conveyed hope and a sober message. “I believe in Nelson Mandela’s vision of equality and justice and freedom and multi-racial democracy, built on the premise that all people are created equal and they’re endowed by our creator with certainly inalienable rights,” Obama said. He noted that people around the world are claiming and advancing their unique stories, or political subjectivities. He also described how the impulse is easily manipulated. “A politics of fear and resentment and retrenchment...is now on the move... at a pace that would have seemed unimaginable just a few years ago...Strongman politics are ascendant suddenly [and] those in power seek to undermine every institution or norm that gives democracy meaning.” The challenges are immense. “Social media -- once seen as a mechanism to promote knowledge and understanding and solidarity -- has proved to be just as effective promoting hatred and paranoia and propaganda and conspiracy theories.” Echoing theorists such as Emmanuel Levine who notes that the struggle to affirm oneself “without regard for the Other” can result in violence and savagery, Obama cautioned that often “People elevate themselves by putting somebody else down.”

Simultaneously drawing on and complicating Nelson Mandela’s legacy, Obama proposed a “respectful amendment” to Mandela’s emphasis on struggle against injustice. “It’s not enough for us to protest; we’re going to have to build.” Obama argued that to reverse the politics of fear and resentment requires “focusing more on the grassroots.” He emphasized that “the civic culture that we build [is what] makes democracy work.” He stressed the importance of “work” itself in a time of radical transformation. “It’s not just money that a job provides. It provides dignity and structure and a sense of place and a sense of purpose.”

My presentation at the JERA, “A different kind of politics,” develops Obama’s focus on work with purpose and building a civic culture. I argue that work which builds a common life across differences, public work, is the crucial project for an age of political subjectivities. The educational imperatives of such work require attention not only to skills and knowledge but also to habits.

The democratic habits of building a common life have a rich but submerged genealogy. It is no accident that the youth civic education and empowerment initiative called Public Achievement, which I began in 1990 as a way for young people to experience the politics I encountered in the citizenship schools of the American civil rights movement, has been picked up by our colleagues at Tokai University. They call it “Public Achievement-style education.” Both Tokai University and the citizenship schools draw on the traditions of N.F.S. Grundtvig’s Danish Folk Schools which had a focus on “education for life” including the public and society-building dimensions of every kind of work.

A hundred years ago, in response to academic arguments that most people are in the grip of raw instincts, John Dewey theorized Jane Addams’ Hull House settlement, much like the folk schools. Dewey proposed that “habits,” not “instincts,” shape human behavior. Habits are not blind repetitions but are learned patterns which create predispositions for action in unexpected circumstances. They can be changed and developed through “intelligent action.” This idea proved fertile for educational innovation. Thus Deborah Meier, a great K-12 democracy educator, founded public schools in East Harlem New York and Boston based on cultivating “five habits of mind.”

I conclude by emphasizing three habits that develop civic agency through public work:

- Thinking politically, not simply in terms of what “should be.” How do young people learn to see the diverse interests, power dynamics, stories, injustices and resources of any environment, “the world as it is”?
- Thinking relationally, “we,” not simply “me.” How do young people learn to build working relationships across sharp differences?
- Thinking as a producer, not simply as a consumer. How do young people see themselves as responsible co-creators of a common life and the commonwealth, not only as claimants of rights and recipients of goods and services?