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# Contesting Utopianism: Hannah Arendt and the Tensions of Democratic Education

AARON SCHUTZ

Throughout the twentieth century, a diverse group of educational scholars struggled against what they saw as fundamentally undemocratic schools and an only nominally democratic society. Often speaking from the margins, scholars working in this vein rejected, for example, the largely rote learning predominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and forms of education that doomed poor and minority students to the lower strata of the labor force. At the core of many of these projects was an effort to create more democratic schools that could foster citizens empowered to change society for the better.<sup>1</sup> Today, questions of democracy are as peripheral to the mainstream educational discourse as they have usually been in the past, taking a backseat to fears about global competitiveness, declining academic achievement, and individual morality, among other issues. Nonetheless, scholarly attempts to envision and promote more democratic schooling have continued unabated, with a large number of books and articles appearing recently. And with the re-

segregation of education in the cities of the United States and with the rise of efforts to “standardize” students through increasingly high-stakes, narrowly conceived, standards-based assessments, the struggle for more democratic schooling remains of crucial importance.<sup>2</sup> It is as a contribution to this larger effort that I discuss Hannah Arendt’s distinctive model of “public space,” exploring its potential role in our understanding of the relationship between democracy and education.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most important, her work provides a potential counter to what I perceive to be a problematic “utopian impulse” among many current educational scholars.

But what exactly *is* democratic education? The fact is that, a vast range of different forms of community have been termed “democratic” at different times, and different scholars have drawn from very different understandings of this term.<sup>4</sup> A broad spectrum of different policy efforts, ranging from vouchers to home schooling to civics classes to standards development projects, have at different times been called “democratic.” As Michael Apple and James Beane point out, although “the idea of democracy presumably serves as a crucial benchmark for judging events and ideas” in the United States, “central tenets and ethical anchors” of this kind “tend to be converted into rhetorical slogans and political codes to gain popular support for all manner of ideas.” Thus, “we hear the democracy defense used countless times every day to justify almost anything people want to do.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this diversity, there is a core group of scholars in education that tends to draw a basic understanding of democracy from the most prominent writer on educational democracy: John Dewey.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century, Dewey wrote in response to the predominantly regimented schooling of his time, as well as to a society in which he felt individuals were increasingly powerless against an expanding industrialism. Dewey argued that democratic communities are those in which a collection of individuals participates together on a shared project, in which, as Dewey said, “each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own.”<sup>7</sup> In democracy, as Dewey understood it, people collaborate together to solve shared problems. Further, he argued that every human being is unique, with a unique

potential all her own.<sup>8</sup> In schools (and society) the way it was (and still is), however, this potential rarely had an opportunity to fully manifest itself. He was convinced that it is only within the context of democratic communities that individuals are able to flourish in their distinctiveness, as each person learns to make creative contributions to shared efforts. Current scholars often add a discussion of the importance of “group” diversity to this mix. Finally, central to his model is the idea that through critical, “scientific,” collaborative engagement with the world, we have at least the potential to develop increasingly democratic and egalitarian societies, eliminating the oppressions and inequalities of the present and breaking down the barriers that separate groups and classes.<sup>9</sup> By learning through our interactions with the environment, he believed, we could slowly develop increasing control over aspects of our world and ourselves.

Dewey understood that tremendous obstacles stood in the way of the development of a more democratic society. He was quite clear that what might constitute “democracy” as a concrete set of social practices in any particular context could never be determined ahead of time in the abstract. He did not argue that the contentiousness of democratic engagement would be overcome, nor did he believe it should be. And although those who follow or draw from him generally acknowledge that democracy is a “process” and not a clearly defined goal, that perfect democracy is an impossibility, Deweyan *criteria* of democracy are often presented as if they constitute an unproblematic good, universally relevant for all human beings. Furthermore, Dewey firmly believed that anything was at least possible for human beings and that all barriers could at least potentially be overcome through careful “scientific” inquiry.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there is what I would call a subtle “utopian” aspect to Dewey’s democratic model and among those influenced by him: a vision, despite its abstraction, of a kind of shining city on the hill, if you will, that is always to be sought, even if it can never quite be achieved.<sup>11</sup>

The wide range of work in the current literature that draws upon Dewey’s vision is quite diverse, each scholar arriving at her own particular interpretation and usually drawing on other sources as well. Nonetheless, versions of the basic criteria for democracy I sketched above remain prominent. Apple and Beane provide a good example.

Even though they do not focus on Dewey's work, they acknowledge that "most of the impulse toward democratic schooling rests on . . . [his] prolific work," and the model they sketch is largely compatible with the one I have just discussed (*DS*, 21). With Dewey, Apple and Beane acknowledge, "exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions" that "point to the fact that bringing democracy to life is always a struggle." Ultimately, however, they argue that "beyond them [i.e., these tensions and contradictions] lies the possibility for professional educators and citizens to work together in creating more democratic schools that serve the common good of the whole community" (*DS*, 8). The problem for Apple and Beane, then, as for many proponents of visions of democratic education indebted to Dewey, is not with what Apple and Beane call the "'idealized' set of values" of an egalitarian democracy, which they note "we must live [by] and that must guide our life as a people" (*DS*, 7); instead, it is with the failure to fully live up to these ideals. They therefore admit "to having what Dewey and others have called the 'democratic faith,' the fundamental belief that democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs" (*DS*, 6).

My point is not to reject democracy, nor is it to denigrate the important work that has been done on educational democracy. Nevertheless, I worry, along with Cornel West, that Dewey and those like him have sometimes failed to understand (or at least to emphasize) that "all human struggles . . . including successful ones—against specific forms of evil produce new, though possibly lesser, forms of evil."<sup>12</sup> I will argue that Arendt's vision of the public is useful for education in part because it takes the inevitability of these limitations and trade-offs seriously. As she once said in an interview, "I know that one has to pay a price for freedom" even though "I cannot say that I like to pay it."<sup>13</sup>

Like Dewey, Arendt developed her model of the public in response to oppressions she encountered in the world—specifically, her experience and later study of Nazi Germany. Unlike Dewey, however, she learned from the Nazis the dangers of believing that "everything is possible."<sup>14</sup> It was because the Nazis believed this, Arendt argued, that they came to see "everything that exists . . . [as] only a tempo-

rary obstacle” to their desires (*OT*, 387). For those unethical experimentalists, those twisted pragmatists, the inconvenient facts of reality, especially its unpredictability and complexity, became unbearable constraints to their ambitions. Like Dewey, they created laboratories, but not in the spirit of democracy; instead, in search of absolute “scientific” control in their concentration camps, they conducted an “experiment with or rather against reality” on their own citizens, carrying out “the indecent experimental inquiry into what is possible” (*OT*, 392, 436). Instead of fostering individual fulfillment in the midst of community, the Nazis sought to eliminate every last vestige of individual agency, to develop a realm truly of the living dead, who, like Pavlov’s dog, “all react with perfect reliability even when going to their deaths” (*OT*, 455). They attempted to create a totally malleable, fictional world, in which the totalitarian movement and its leaders, as a collective organism, achieved total domination.

Whereas Dewey believed that increasingly perfect, if always shifting, democracies could be achieved through wholly democratic methods<sup>15</sup>—in fact, he argued that democracy could be achieved only through democratic means—the Nazis taught Arendt that the very practice of aiming toward utopian ends, the belief that everything is possible, the refusal of human limitations, can be the first step toward totalitarianism.<sup>16</sup> If Dewey’s vision and that of many of those who draw from him tends toward the “transcendent,” then Arendt’s is firmly “human” and “tragic,”<sup>17</sup> rooted in the mud of tenuous compromises and the necessity of loss.<sup>18</sup>

I begin with an overview of Arendt’s model of the “public,” followed by a discussion of the compromises she was convinced her model entails, illustrating its potential relevance for schools as I go. I then explore a relatively detailed example of how “public space” might actually be instantiated into an educational context. Although I discuss some key similarities and differences between Arendt and Dewey as I proceed, there is not space to do full justice to a detailed comparison of their rich visions, nor is this my goal. Ultimately, my aim is not to somehow replace Dewey’s model with Arendt’s or to synthesize them together. Rather, I hope that Arendt’s model of the public will serve as an instructive corrective to what I see as problematic “utopian” tendencies in the current literature on democracy

and education. Whereas the particular human limitations she discussed are internal to her particular conceptualization of democratic action, her work models an anti-utopian approach to democratic education that, I argue, is relevant more broadly. At the same time, I seek to provide a deeper understanding of the unique ways her theoretical perspective might illuminate possibilities for democratic action in educational settings, in conjunction, perhaps, with other visions like Dewey's.

### Public Space: A First Approximation

Arendt believed that all human beings are fundamentally unique, to the point that "with respect to this somebody [i.e., everybody] who is unique, it can truly be said that nobody was there before." This uniqueness, she argued, arises largely out of each person's unrepeatable biography of experiences. In Arendt's view, it is because of each person's uniqueness that "the unexpected can be expected from him . . . [and that] he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable."<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that all human beings are capable of what she called "action," the ability to start entirely new processes that could not have been predicted from what came before.

Arendt argued, however, that authentically human action is not possible without the accompaniment of speech, which discloses the actor who acts. Although a person's "deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment," she noted, "it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do" (*HC*, 178). Without speech to disclose the actor behind an action, a "deed" becomes a mere happening, a brute event without any clear connections to the desires of an agent. Her vision of democracy, then, is very much a dialogic one.

But although *all* speech discloses one's uniqueness to one extent or another, Arendt's examination of totalitarianism taught her that there were in fact contexts in which an individual's uniqueness could be almost entirely suppressed, that people could be reduced to the level of robots. Furthermore, she worried that, in the modern world,

what she called “society” or the “social” increasingly predominated, expecting “from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action” (HC, 40). In fact, all around her she saw a society in which speech had increasingly lost its ability to disclose “who” individuals were in their uniqueness and in which, in ways reminiscent of the Nazi era, unpredictable, individual agency was slowly becoming simply a threat to the smooth, predictable functioning of the collective organism of the “social.” In response, Arendt looked back through the record of Western history, seeking evidence of social practices that might allow individuals to respond collectively to oppression without being absorbed into a group. Drawing from an astonishingly diverse range of examples, from the ancient Greeks to the French and American Revolutions to her experience serving on a civil jury, she synthesized her model of “public space.”

A public space, for her, is created when individuals come together in a particular way around an issue or object of common concern, something perhaps best understood as a “common project.” Such a project acts as what she called an “in-between” or, from the Latin, “*inter-est*” that both “relates and separates men at the same time,” each participant contributing her own unique interpretations of it (HC, 182, 54). Out of these multiple interpretations, the space itself is *constituted* as a space, as each member “appears” in a distinctive “location” with respect to their shared concern. Although in other contexts an individual might disclose something about herself by speaking, only in public can individuals achieve a coherent *position* by relating their own opinions to those expressed by others in that space. In such a space, individuals act, not as a unit, but, in Arendt’s words, “in concert,” each making a unique contribution to their collective effort. And because each participant is neither autonomous nor simply a cog in a collective machine, immense creative “power” for unpredictable change is generated (HC, 201). She contrasted this with the “strength” that comes from a collection of individuals who come together as a unit, like a mob or a cult, which, she argued, can always be overcome by the potentiality represented by power.<sup>20</sup> In fact, she noted that through public action, “popular revolt against

materially strong rulers . . . may engender an almost irresistible power even if it forgoes the use of violence in the face of materially vastly superior forces" (*HC*, 200–201).

Public spaces do not simply allow us to act together with others, however. They also provide the only contexts in which we are able to fully experience ourselves as coherent agents. Paradoxically, in Arendt's model, we can emerge as unique actors only if we act *with* others. As Bonnie Honig notes, in Arendt's writings, "prior to or apart from action," from an appearance in a public space, a "self has no identity; it is fragmented, discontinuous, indistinct. . . . Arendt's actors do not act because of what they already are, their actions do not express a prior, stable identity; they presuppose an unstable multiple self that seeks its, at best, episodic self-realization in action and in the identity that is its reward."<sup>21</sup> Only in the public can individuals experience this shock of self-discovery. And when discourse in a public space ceases, when individuals cease to appear in locations with respect to one another, the space collapses and participants are returned to the evanescent realms they inhabited before they entered the public. In fact, Arendt's work implies that individuals often shift back and forth between public and nonpublic ways of being in the world. Public selfhood for Arendt, then, is extremely tenuous.

As should be clear from my introduction, this vision of the public holds many similarities to basic Deweyan democratic ideals. It is instructive to note, however, that while Dewey also stressed the importance of participation in democratic projects in fostering one's unique potential, his descriptions of the selfhood one achieves reflect little of the evanescence that is so prominent in Arendt's writings. Moreover, as I note in more detail below, Arendt's model is focused on tensions created when utterly unique individuals seek to act together without giving up their distinctiveness, an issue Dewey never really addressed in any detail. In fact, as Craig Cunningham notes, Dewey acknowledged near the end of his life, in response to the rise of the same totalitarianism that informed Arendt, "that individual initiative and choice were far more important for securing democracy than he had previously thought."<sup>22</sup> In some sense, then, Arendt's work explores the implications of an aspect of egalitarian



democracy that remained largely submerged in Dewey's own writings, although the path she takes is surely quite different from the one Dewey might have taken.

A recent article discussing a fifth-grade elementary school class that worked together, successfully, to change the child seat-belt laws in their state provides a useful example for illuminating some of the implications of Arendt's model for actual classroom practice.<sup>23</sup> Because the authors do not give much detail about exactly what the students did, we are left to imagine different possibilities. Already, one could imagine ways to go about this project that would not correspond to Arendt's public model. One could imagine, for example, a process dominated by the teacher, or by a few articulate or forceful students, in which the perspectives of all would not be heard and everyone's contributions would not count equally. Other problematic approaches would assign individuals to predetermined roles and responsibilities before the activity even began. If this classroom were to engage in "public" action as Arendt defined it, not only would the perspectives of all need to be taken into account, but students would need to feel safe enough to be as honest as possible in their contributions.

### **Tensions in the Public**

Despite the enormous creative power of public spaces, Arendt argued that they are precarious achievements. As I note in this section, they are sustained by a complex dance of engagement in which participants seek an elusive balance between conflicting ways of being and acting with others. There are, I maintain, at least three fundamentally different tensions faced by participants in a public space. First of all, if they are to avoid either splintering their space apart or collapsing it into a realm of mass society, actors must be willing to risk disclosing their unique perspectives while restraining themselves from expressing their full singularity. Second, although participants must constantly make judgments, courageously taking sometimes controversial positions, they must avoid attempts to coerce others through assertions or logical demonstrations of incontestable truth and certainty. Finally, if they are to maintain possibilities for free ac-

tion, participants in a public space must establish some stability and predictability in their shared space but must reject efforts to control and dominate the future. Fundamentally, excess of all kinds is corrosive to the fragile compromise that, for the time a public space can be maintained, allows a collection of unique individuals to retain their distinctiveness while still working together as a collective. In fact, the demands of this practice are so great that even though Arendt searched for ways that more permanent public realms could be founded, in her early writings on the subject she feared that public action was something “too anarchic to be compatible with any settled political structure.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Between Distinctiveness and Banality*

Although Arendt believed that each individual human being is unique, and although she envisioned the public as a place where this individual distinction might “appear,” she was convinced that the very structure of the public puts severe limitations on the level of distinctiveness that might be expressed there. As I noted above, public spaces cannot exist without objects of common concern that allow members to locate themselves with respect to other participants. Thus, a space survives only so long as these objects, these shared projects, can “be seen in a variety of aspects without changing their identity.” In other words, when participants can no longer understand how the actions or comments of others are addressed to the *same* issue that they themselves are concerned with, the space disintegrates (*HC*, 57–58).

In public, then, only contributions that can be understood by other participants as “relevant” can be allowed. The radically unique “thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses” must be “transformed, deprivatized, deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (*HC*, 50). A person who refuses to engage in such a transformation will find herself inexorably expelled from the public, as other participants increasingly cannot see her interpretations as coherent contributions to the project they share. And if large numbers of participants in a public engage in

such interpretive excess, the entire space can splinter completely apart, as participants become lost in the isolated singularity of their own experience, as the *common* nature of their effort is entirely lost. Of course, this raises difficult questions about what will “count” as relevant and about potential limits on the amount of diversity such an apparently egalitarian space can actually embrace, and it implies (although Arendt did not argue this) that there will often be a multiplicity of public spaces on a single issue, multiply conceived.

Similarly, efforts by participants to see others in their complete distinctiveness, to turn public relationships into what she called “intimate” ones, also threaten the existence of the public. Love, for example, because it encompasses another person in his or her totality, “is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions, . . . destroy[s] . . . the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others” (*HC*, 242). Love, she argues, eliminates our ability to place others in relatively coherent locations with respect to a shared concern, as well as our ability to respond to others as political actors whom we judge by their actions instead of as loved ones we accept for who they are. Arendt’s point here is not that we cannot create public spaces with those we love—in fact, intimate relationships with others can help us better understand the experiences that lie behind what people say in a public space.<sup>25</sup> Instead, to enter a public space, we must temporarily alter the way we interact with those we love. Two senators may be married, but in the Senate, they must treat each other as senators. To participate in public, love must be left at least temporarily behind, isolated away from the public and replaced with respect and regard for the political positions taken by others. Public dialogue, Arendt writes, is “not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Not only extreme uniqueness threatens the public, however; banality, shallowness, and attempts to submerge oneself into the crowd are also dangerous. As I noted above, Arendt worried constantly that public spaces were rapidly disappearing from the modern world, as individuals increasingly engaged in activities in which their

unique potential was largely irrelevant. If such attitudes and ways of being invade a public space, if participants become unwilling to risk exposing their particular perspectives and understandings before others, the plurality of the space will disappear and the space will collapse into banality.

To return to our example of the elementary school classroom, Arendt's model indicates that students learning to participate in public spaces with others must learn to separate their personal friendships from their "public" relationships with often the same children. In this sense, then, initiating students into public practices requires them to distinguish between the selves they and others take on when they are and are not participating in public action. If the space is to remain vibrant, the children would need to help one another keep their comments relevant to the project under consideration. At the same time, however, they would need to listen carefully to what their classmates are saying, since many seemingly irrelevant contributions may actually represent potentially innovative ideas that require other participants to shift their understandings of the nature of their shared project in order for their relevancy to be understood. Finally, they would need to learn to constantly balance the encouragement of heartfelt participation with the danger that their space might splinter apart under the pressure of too much diversity, walking a fine line between distinctiveness and banality.

A teacher would need to artfully guide such activity, because the complexity of these ideas means that no set of predetermined rules could ever do them justice. The very idea of "relevancy," for example, would need to be grappled with constantly in the course of their collective engagements. Interestingly, under this model, an activity like brainstorming, in which there is no clear common project guiding dialogue and in which there is no pressure to be relevant, constitutes an essentially *prepolitical* practice. It may in fact be true, however, that the *prepolitical* engagements we have with others, getting to know them in their full cultural and personal individuality, are fundamental requirements for the development of public spaces in which all but the most homogeneous might join together.<sup>27</sup>

*Between Truth and Relativism*

If someone in possession of the truth were to enter a public space, there would be no reason for her to pay much attention to the opinions of others; the only goal of communication, for her, would be to coerce others through the force of her logic or rhetoric to adopt her point of view. If she were successful, however, if a consensus on the truth were actually achieved within a public, if the multiple perspectives of participants were reduced to a single identically shared perspective, the space, dependent upon disagreement for its very existence, would immediately collapse. Arendt argued, therefore, that “public debate can only deal with things which . . . we cannot figure out with any certainty.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, however, since all individuals are fundamentally, utterly unique under this vision, it is not possible for any two people to *fully* agree, to entirely correspond in their understandings, unless one or both of them suppress aspects of their own perspectives. Whereas a particular scientific finding, for example, might not be effectively contestable by participants, the implications of this finding for the world can nonetheless remain very much an open question (*MDT*, 7).<sup>29</sup>

One of the best examples of Arendt’s musings on how public actors should approach the issues they encounter in public arenas arises in her essay on the eighteenth-century writer Gotthold Lessing. Rejecting efforts to achieve some detached and universal objectivity on the issues of his time, Arendt noted, Lessing sought to preserve a form of freedom that was “endangered by those who wanted ‘to compel faith by proofs’” (*MDT*, 7). “He not only wanted no one to coerce him, but he wanted to coerce no one, either by force or by proofs” (*MDT*, 8). In his efforts to create a world in which creative, engaged thought would be paramount, he was willing to sacrifice even “the axiom of noncontradiction, the claim to self-consistency, which we assume is mandatory to all who write and speak” (*MDT*, 7). Self-contradiction for the sake of the world was, for him, a virtue. “He was glad for the sake of the infinite number of opinions that arise when men discuss the affairs of this world,” fearing that if absolute truth were actually found, this

would mean “an end to discourse and thus to friendship, and thus to humanness” (*MDT*, 26).

Yet, in his rejection of truth, Lessing did not go to the opposite extreme, to a celebration of the kind of thoughtless relativity and free play visible, for example, in some of the more simplistic versions of “postmodernism” that have recently deluged cultural theory. Instead, Lessing’s opinions were always responsive to the contributions of others and sensitive to what he understood as the needs of the world at the particular moment that he wrote (*MDT*, 7).<sup>30</sup> From Arendt’s perspective, then, the opinions one presents in public cannot be simply drawn somehow from the darkness of one’s inner self but must instead arise from a concerned engagement with the opinions of others and the particulars of the issue under consideration. Thus, although Lessing lived at a time in which there were few public spaces available, Arendt nonetheless saw him as a quintessential proto-public actor whose partisan opinion “has nothing whatsoever to do with [isolated] subjectivity because it is always framed not in terms of the self but in terms of the relationship of men to their world, in terms of their positions and opinions” (*MDT*, 29). It was, Arendt argued, “because Lessing was a completely political person [that] he insisted that truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse, only where each man says not what just happens to occur to him at the moment, but what he ‘deems truth’” (*MDT*, 30). Actors in Arendtian public spaces attempt to persuade others, then, but their perspectives must always remain open to being changed by the actions and statements of these others. A public opinion, reflecting neither certainty nor subjectivity, can never be more nor less than simply a considered, contingent judgment.

This tension is perhaps the most compatible with Dewey’s pragmatic vision. For Dewey, as well, rejected any “quest for certainty” in the world, stressing the constant change and uncertainty human beings must always face, despite his fundamental belief that we could slowly increase our control of our environment through scientific engagement. Even so, however, he did not focus to my knowledge, in the way Arendt did, on the danger that “truth” could hold for the very existence of democracy itself.<sup>31</sup>

In response to this tension between truth and relativism, our elementary students would need to learn to follow Lessing's example of a complex balancing act in their engagement with the world. For the children, authentic public action would entail a constantly shifting engagement with the world and with the multiple perspectives of other participants, the unique ways of seeing of each becoming a resource for their shared effort. From a strictly Arendtian perspective, for example, the desire to find the correct answer, common in many current schooling practices, would be seen as a tool for shutting down dialogue and destroying the possibility of "concerted" as opposed to mass action. Of course, this is clearly compatible with some recent writings on constructivist teaching. Furthermore, the Lessing example emphasizes the extent to which the focus of action in a public space must be on a collective effort to "care for the world," in Arendt's terms, instead of on any child's particular interests. Personal opinion in this sense becomes not how one wishes the world to be, but what one understands the world to need in this particular moment.

### *Between Control and Chaos*

The most difficult tension of the public arises from the fact that the very conditions that generate creative power in the public also produce instability and unpredictability, the effects of which reverberate uncontrollably into the world and constantly threaten to tear apart public spaces (and sometimes the world itself). For, *by definition*, one can never control the results of one's actions in a public space or the ways in which others interpret what one says.

"In the realm of action," Arendt noted, "isolated mastership can be achieved only if the others are no longer needed to join the enterprise of their own accord, with their own motives and aims" (*HC*, 222). In fact, "since action acts," within the public at least, "upon beings who are capable of their own actions," she argued, "reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others." Public action is boundless, reverberating potentially forever into the future, and "the smallest act in the

most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (*HC*, 190). Action, then, is fundamentally tragic, because “he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, . . . he always becomes ‘guilty’ of consequences he never intended or even foresaw” (*HC*, 233). Because of this, an actor in this model appears “much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he had done” (*HC*, 234).

Arendt argued that this unpredictability of action led many in the past to seek out ways to stabilize and control these processes, to escape the tragedy that almost invariably accompanies public action and collective power. Yet the very structure of the public means that to control the results of one’s actions would be to destroy the space itself, eliminating the creative and thus unpredictable initiative of one’s fellow actors. Even to guarantee one’s own future actions would be destructive to agency, eliminating the freedom of one’s future self to respond to the contingencies of an unknown tomorrow.

Chaos, however, is just as unacceptable as total control of the future. No coherent public could hope to survive for any perceptible period of time in the midst of chaos. It would inevitably be torn apart by its own productivity, generating unstoppable processes and wracking the world with storms of destructive change. Complete unpredictability would even be destructive of our own sense of coherent selfhood; for if we were unable to depend at all on who we would be tomorrow, “we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and unequivocalities” (*HC*, 237). We must have some assurances about how others in the space with us and even how we ourselves will act, some limit on the abilities of all to act creatively.

In Arendt’s view, the only solution to the twin dangers of control and chaos is to seek an unstable and always uncertain balance between these two extremes, bringing some stability to the public and to the world without also eliminating the very freedom that allows the public to exist at all. This compromise involves two different aspects for Arendt: our capacity for making promises and our capacity for forgiving others. Promises allow the collective of the public “the



sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will . . . but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding”; this limited arena of certainty has an “unquestioned superiority over those who are completely free, unbound by any promises and unkept by any purpose” (*HC*, 245). It is by being “bound to the fulfillment of promises” to others that we are “able to keep our identities,” holding ourselves responsible for what we have said before and making guarantees about what we will do in the future (*HC*, 237). Through such promises, free participants in public spaces “leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are, using them merely as the medium, as it were, into which certain islands of predictability are thrown.” But “the moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty, that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating” (*HC*, 244).

Promises alone are not enough to provide stability to the public, however, both because of the enormously productive reverberations that result from the chains of action and reaction and because participants are constantly in the position of failing to live up to the contracts they have made with others. “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done,” Arendt worried, “our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever” (*HC*, 237). “Only through this constant mutual release from what they do,” Arendt noted, “can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as to start something new” (*HC*, 240).

But this tenuous solution largely applies to reverberations *within* a public space and cannot reach particularly far beyond it. When one acts into the world, one begins processes that progress beyond the ability of anyone to predict or control. Arendt feared, for example, that by acting into nature, scientists were increasingly “unchaining . . . potentially irreversible, irremediable ‘processes of no return’ . . . whose outcome remains uncertain and unpredictable whether

they are let loose in the human or the natural world" (*HC*, 231–232).<sup>32</sup> For this and other reasons, she vehemently rejected efforts to understand public "action" through the metaphor of "making," as if one could control the results of action through a kind of planned fabrication of the future.

This is where Arendt's vision diverges perhaps most fundamentally from a Deweyan one. As I have noted, Dewey saw democratic action as a process of seeking increasing control over one's environment. In Dewey's pragmatic vision, all actions are aimed toward particular, although always interim, ends in the world, ends that then become means for yet further actions. In a Deweyan world, one always acts to obtain consequences in the world, and one always judges the outcome of one's act by the consequences it produces.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Arendt argued, in part because of the dangers I noted above, that actors should never treat their engagement in public as an attempt to achieve particular ends (*HC*, 229). Instead, actors and spectators should act and judge based on what she called, rather vaguely, "principles," noting that "action, to be free, must be free from motive on the one side, from its intended goal as predictable effect on the other."<sup>34</sup> Thus, she said, "the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word . . . must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse" (*HC*, 205).

Though there is more subtlety to Arendt's claim than I have done justice to here, still her stance appears to be a relatively extreme response to the problems she has raised.<sup>35</sup> Dewey, for example, is surely right that although we can never fully know the results of an action, we can certainly begin to notice patterns of results that occur when we act and thus begin to achieve a level of control in our environment, even if it is never perfect. However, Arendt does point us to an area that Dewey and, I am convinced, many current scholars tend to neglect. For Dewey did in fact acknowledge the limitations inherent in ever tracing the impact of one's actions into the future, noting, for example, that "no one can take into account all the consequences of the acts he performs."<sup>36</sup> Yet it is not Dewey but Arendt who plays out the potential implications of this limitation, who illuminates the inherent tragedies of action.

Indeed, I am convinced that her vision has special relevance for us as we enter the twenty-first century. Ulrich Beck has recently argued, for instance, that we have created with our technology and our science a “risk society,” with reverberating environmental and other dangers of such scale and complexity that “the very idea of controllability, certainty or security . . . collapses.”<sup>37</sup> Beck’s comments stand in stark contrast to Dewey’s hopes for an ever-increasing control of the environment through democratic “scientific” inquiry.<sup>38</sup> To fail to address these issues with students, or in our writings on democracy and democratic education, seems, to me at least, enormously problematic and potentially dangerous.

Despite the dangers, Arendt was not attempting to argue against public action, which she celebrated, but instead against hubris. In fact, if one tempers Arendt’s statements about the relationship between public action and particular goals or aims in the world, one arrives at a vision that is very compatible with that of West, whose

prophetic pragmatism denies [both] Sisyphean pessimism and utopian pessimism. Rather, it promotes the possibility of human progress and the human impossibility of paradise. This progress results from principled and protracted Promethean efforts, yet even such efforts are no guarantee. . . . It calls for utopian energies and tragic actions, energies and actions that yield permanent and perennial revolutionary, rebellious, and reformist strategies that oppose the status quos of our day.

West argues that “these strategies are never to become ends-in-themselves, but rather to remain means through which are channeled moral outrage and human desperation in the face of prevailing forms of evil in human societies and in human lives.” It is in this way, West argues, that the inescapable fact of “tragedy can be an impetus rather than an impediment to oppositional activity.”<sup>39</sup>

To respond to this third and final tension within the classroom, then, the teacher would need, first, to help the elementary school children learn to accept, and perhaps even value, the mistakes of others. Further, although they would need to create a collective plan for action, this plan would need to remain open to the creative actions of others, often refraining from mapping out the future in spe-

cific terms. They would need to learn to traverse the tension between agreements that mean nothing and contracts that are set in stone, unbreakable regardless of changes in the world. Finally, with respect to the world beyond their small public, helping children understand this particular tension of public spaces would almost seem to require engaging students in an activity, like an attempt to change a state's child seat-belt laws, that takes them beyond their classrooms. For it is very difficult to simulate the complex and often perverse workings of the larger society inside a school.

Certainly, students could engage with the stories of past struggles, discussing, for example, the conflicted outcomes of the effort to eliminate segregated schooling (or, actually, to achieve equal access to education) in the United States. Without denigrating what was achieved, students could learn how "success" led to thousands of African American teachers being fired, to thousands of students of color being tracked into lower-level classes in majority white schools, and to hundreds of local African American schools being dismantled.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, however, only by engaging in an actual collective effort in the world beyond the school, only by leaving the safety of their relatively controlled environment, could students hope to fully experience the myriad and uncontrollable factors that arise when one acts into the world. And it is only through such rich experience that they could hope to truly learn the dilemmas that come with public engagement. Thus, within an Arendtian model, learning to accept failure and the often unpredictable outcomes that arise from action is on a par with learning to "succeed." To gloss over these complexities for students, to allow them to wear rose-colored glasses about their own projects, would be extremely detrimental to their ability to act together in public in the future.

### **Putting It All Together: The Example of Public Achievement**

At this point, I examine a comprehensive effort to initiate youth into a vibrant practice of citizen politics that resonates with much of Arendt's vision. I begin by emphasizing those aspects of a project

named Public Achievement which map onto Arendt's model of the public, also noting areas in which she would probably have pushed the project's developers further. Although much of Public Achievement is compatible with her understanding of public action, and although some of the developers were clearly influenced by her ideas, the project nonetheless diverges from her vision in a number of significant ways, as I discuss at the end of this section.<sup>41</sup>

Public Achievement, originally a joint project of the mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Project Public Life (now the Center for Democracy and Citizenship), based at the University of Minnesota, is "an experiment in civic education for young people."<sup>42</sup> It draws from a vision of democracy developed by Harry C. Boyte, co-director of Project Public Life, and his colleagues, in which "the politics of serious democracy is a give and take, messy, everyday activity in which citizens set about dealing with public problems, the issues of our common existence." Participating in such "citizen politics," the developers argue, "requires an education in political ideas and skills, and environments in which people can learn and practice political arts" ("Evaluation," 3).

As a part of the project, "teams of six to twelve young people work within their schools or other organizations, with coaches, to solve public problems that are important to them." These teams are based in "public, private, and parochial elementary and middle schools, along with a few community based organizations and high schools." The coaches are "college students, adult leaders of the youth institutions, and in some cases community leaders" who work to guide students' efforts to develop their plans and issues and who help students learn from and reflect on their experiences ("Evaluation," 4).

The manual for the effort, written and rewritten at different times by a broad collection of individuals involved with the project, describes a series of steps students can take as they move toward action. (I draw here on two different versions of this manual, titled *Making the Rules*, that include a wider range of exercises.) First, students are encouraged to tell their "story," to get in touch with the history of experiences that makes them unique. These stories, the manual tells students, help others understand each person's perspec-

tive, giving others “clues about who we are.” At the same time, the manual notes, such stories “help you understand yourself, too.” It argues, therefore, that “learning who you are by learning to tell your unique story is the first step toward working in the public arena.” Early on, then, the project focuses on encouraging students to tease out their distinctive perspectives.<sup>43</sup>

The writers also argue that as a part of this process, students should come to know their “self-interest” better. Although this may initially seem quite different from Arendt’s admonition to care for the world, the manual actually distinguishes between “selfishness,” which is about one’s private desires, and “self-interest,” in which one connects one’s interests with those of others in public more broadly. Through one’s self-interest, one serves the world at the same time as one serves issues relevant to oneself. In fact, although the developers do not cite Arendt, they clearly draw upon her idiosyncratic definition of what she called “*inter-est*” when they note that it “comes from the Latin phrase ‘to be among’” and argue, therefore, that “self-interest always has to do with what you’re working for in a group of people” (*MTR*, 10).

The manual gives a range of activities for helping students get in touch with their distinctive biographies; yet it also cautions them that there are important differences between the kinds of relationships and selves they can take on in private settings among friends and family as opposed to those in public spaces amid other political actors. Not everything from their personal story can be brought into the public. Much like Arendt, the project developers argue that private life “is where you seek close relationships . . . [and] where you gain acceptance for just being yourself, and not so much what you contribute.” The private is where you can bring your whole self. The public, in contrast, is “where you become aware of hopes and concerns you share with others and where you act on them. It’s where you learn the value of hearing many different viewpoints. It’s where you are held accountable and get recognition for what you contribute. . . . It is where your actions, commitment, and effectiveness determine how seriously people take you” (*MTR*, 20). Furthermore, like Arendt, they argue that it is in public that one achieves “a sense of self-discovery” (*MTR*, 21). Despite these similarities to Arendt’s

model, the manual does not emphasize one of Arendt's key issues on this point—namely, the extent to which excessive distinctiveness of each individual is a danger to the continued existence of the public—though it does discuss the broader challenges of group diversity.

Beginning with a brainstorming session, the manual guides students through a process designed to help them uncover a common problem that connects with their myriad self-interests. After they define a common problem, students are to develop a mission statement, something like the following: “We, the Public Achievement team at Hypothetical Jr. High, will no longer stand by as our school ignores the pollution we cause in our community and the world. As a first goal to reduce our negative environmental impact, we will work with the administration, staff, and students to develop a recycling program in our school” (*MTR*, 14). Such a statement clearly fulfills two of Arendt's principal requirements for a common project. First, although it represents an agreement about future actions, it leaves quite a lot of room for flexibility about what, exactly, will be done. Second, in part because of this flexibility, this mission statement is vague enough that it can be easily interpreted in a unique way from multiple perspectives. The agreement, therefore, does not collapse the plurality in the space or the unpredictable creative contributions that might be made to it.

In fact, Public Achievement even attempts to foster an understanding among students of the diverse ways in which different individuals interpret language. It includes an activity in which students take a specific political word and define it from each of their unique personal perspectives. This exercise argues against the strategy of dictionaries, which “try to give words meanings that everyone can accept, without any personal interpretations,” arguing that “like politics, language belongs to those who use it—not just the ‘experts’” (*MTR*, 16). In a range of different ways, then, students are encouraged to discover unique perspectives about their shared effort.

Although the manual does not speak directly of “truth,” it nonetheless presents an essentially relational vision of acting with and against others in the world. Students are expected to continually adjust tactics and strategies to the shifting aspects of their environ-

ment. The project especially focuses on building skills for interviewing and active listening so that participants might continually gather data on the perspectives, ideas, and feelings of others, both within and beyond their group, on their issue.

The key aspect of Arendt's vision that is missing from the Public Achievement model, however, is the tension she saw as perhaps most important of all: that between chaos and control. Whereas Arendt's vision on this issue is rather dark, Public Achievement's is fairly upbeat. The developers have attempted to encourage students to believe that they *can* take control, that they *can* "make the rules," and, implicitly, that they can determine the results that those rules dictate. In fact, a later version of the manual, clearly drawing from Boyte's writings on democracy as participation in "work," is titled *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History*, and it explicitly states that children in Public Achievement are taught that "they can *make history* themselves, today" and that "in a very tangible sense, PA [Public Achievement] teams *make history* every year."<sup>44</sup> Although the developers acknowledge that students can learn a great deal from failure, there is no discussion of the often unpredictable and counterintuitive outcomes of many important struggles. Not addressed are the ways in which victories, as West notes, often generate new "evils" of their own. From an Arendtian perspective, this threatens to mislead students, failing to fully prepare them for the realities of action in a complex and conflicted world.

Despite the ways in which Public Achievement seems largely compatible with Arendt's vision, there are in fact important aspects of this project that diverge quite significantly from her ideal model. Whereas Arendt, as a political theorist, worked to develop an idealized and relatively abstract vision of collective action, looking to a broad spectrum of the Western historical experience, the developers of Public Achievement draw from a much more practical tradition of citizen organizing, focusing more on the American experience, especially that of the twentieth century, and influenced by pragmatic "grassroots" organizers like Saul Alinsky.

Again, Arendt constructed her model of the public not only as an effort to empower people, but also as a response to the submergence of individuality that she experienced in different ways in Nazi Ger-



many, as well as in the banality of modern “society.” The maintenance of a certain kind of plurality within political action was of paramount importance to her. “Truth” is so dangerous to her vision of the public precisely because of its tendency to collapse this plurality into a transparent consensus. In fact, the collective “power” produced in the public was, for her, fundamentally dependent upon this plurality. Instead of what she disparaged as the “strength” of solidarity, power in the public could arise only from the unpredictable creative energy generated only by unique actors acting “in concert.” Because of her desire to foster the distinctiveness of each human being as much as possible given the constraints of collective action, however, she conceptualized actors in public as essentially free-floating, without tight connections to particular communities or contexts. Indeed, she developed the public as a space in which people could *escape* from the constraints and roles that often come with more normalizing forms of community.

Public Achievement also acknowledges the importance of fostering the distinctiveness of all participants. Nonetheless, the developers critically describe an approach to identity like Arendt’s as a “suitcase” model, in which one’s experiences and influences are viewed as simply possessions that one carries around with oneself. In contrast, they recommend the idea of a “tree” as a metaphor for identity, because it is “rooted deeply in the soil”; the manual tells students that “your identity is rooted in your past, in the lives of your family, community, and culture. These roots—this personal story—give you the strength and the nourishment to continually grow” (*MTR*, 10–11). In Public Achievement, then, “self”-interest takes on the additional flavor of an at least partially *collective* interest as well. And to some extent, the activity of telling one’s unique story in Public Achievement appears designed not only to tease out students’ unique perspectives, but also to emphasize the extent to which they are embedded in particular groups and the extent to which they are responsible to these communities. Boyte and his colleagues’ larger vision is one of empowered *communities* of many different kinds, not simply empowered individuals.<sup>45</sup>

Although the developers of Public Achievement value the distinctive contributions of individuals, their project is much less focused

than Arendt's model on maintaining a space of fully egalitarian plurality all the time. Thus, for example, the manual contains no clear admonitions against groups coalescing strategically into relative states of solidarity, in which they would largely act as a unit. The "strength" of solidarity, then, is for them simply another useful political tool. From this perspective, there would be no reason to view the relatively free participation of individuals in efforts they did not themselves initiate as fundamentally undemocratic, depending on the context.

Another crucial difference from Arendt arises in Public Achievement's vision of how one "emerges" into the public from private spaces. Arendt envisioned the public as a space of full equality in which each actor presented herself as honestly as possible, even though one could not fully reveal oneself because of the dangers one's uniqueness presented for the continued existence of the space. Public Achievement, conversely, views the public (framed more broadly than in Arendt) as an always ill-defined space of "strategic" action in which one can never fully trust those with whom one works. The public, for Public Achievement, is where one is "guarded" about what one says and how one acts.<sup>46</sup> The public is a place in which there is unequal power, in which others will often attempt to use your weaknesses and information they gain about you against you.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly the Public Achievement model is not the only way one might imagine developing public spaces in educational settings. Along with my sketchy child seat-belt example, however, it does represent one path by which Arendt's relatively abstract theoretical criteria might be appropriated into an actual educational practice. And though there is little information on what students learned during this process, an evaluation indicated that at least some of the teams were relatively successful. As Boyte and Nancy N. Kari note, Public Achievement teams "have organized high school day care centers for unwed mothers. They have created community parks in settings where adults had initially given up, in the face of skepticism by neighbors. They have created curricula and strategies for dealing with issues like racial prejudice and sexual harassment."<sup>48</sup> Further, although apparently conceived as an add-on to usual classroom in-

struction, in at least one school “nearly all of the students in grades four through eight . . . have participated,” and some teachers are “reinforcing Public Achievement’s lessons in the classroom” (“Evaluation,” 10).

## Conclusion

*To these preoccupations and perplexities, this book does not offer an answer. Such answers are given every day, and they are matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person, as though we dealt here with problems for which only one solution is possible.*

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Paradoxically, it is the *differences* from Arendt’s abstract model that make Public Achievement a good example of a potential instantiation of her vision. For Arendt understood that one could not determine answers in the real world from the abstract perspective of a theorist. However, the very existence of Public Achievement (as evidenced in the number of books by Boyte and others that led up to its creation) required an extensive engagement with theoretical perspectives on the nature of democratic collective action of which Arendt’s was only one. What Public Achievement shows is the extent to which actually using these theories in particular contexts requires that they be adapted and transformed, that they *inform* instead of *direct* one’s efforts.

The developers of Public Achievement are careful to acknowledge that they don’t have all the answers, noting that other approaches to citizen action are not “wrong” and that “often an institution combines two or more approaches in its practices.” In fact, they introduce their manual by stating that it provides “a tool kit to aid in . . . [this] endeavor, not a step-by-step recipe for public life. There is no such recipe, and as creative citizens, you would not want one anyway. Public Achievement is an experiment in a larger civic laboratory.”<sup>49</sup> Still, it *is* a manual, and despite this caution, it retains a

sense that there is a “correct” path that should be taken to prepare students to be active citizens. This tension-filled tendency to declare that one is open to many other possibilities while simultaneously giving the impression that there is, in fact, one correct and essentially universal answer is common among theorists of democracy. In Arendt’s case, despite her statement about the limits of theory in the epigraph above, she also nonetheless often presented her model of the public as if it were “the elementary grammar of political action.”<sup>50</sup> And I have already spoken about the way that Dewey—perhaps unintentionally—tended to present his criteria of democracy as if they were universally relevant, despite his pragmatic convictions.

Examining Public Achievement through the lens of Arendt’s theory illuminates potential lacks, like the project’s avoidance of the tension between chaos and control. At the same time, the case of Public Achievement reveals potential limitations in Arendt’s abstract theory for particular purposes. Such dialogic interactions between theory and practice, or between theories, like Arendt’s and Dewey’s, are, I believe, enormously productive. In the end, however, it would be impossible—and, I would argue, counterproductive in any case—to attempt to synthesize these three visions together into a single approach to the teaching of democracy. Instead, it is important to preserve a multiplicity of very different perspectives on the nature of egalitarian collective action, ensuring that a diverse range of lenses will remain available to illuminate, and be illuminated by, the events and occasions of our age.

This is not only a theoretical issue. For example, in his examination of activism in the United States, Charles C. Euchner argues that no single political practice can be viewed as superior for all activist efforts. In fact, he argues that efforts and organizations that are successful on *multiple* levels at grappling with multiple kinds of issues and contexts are those that embody an overlapping structure of different strategies.<sup>51</sup> It is in this spirit of plurality and dialogue that I have presented Arendt’s model of the public: not only as a counter to the field’s tendency toward utopian thinking, but also as yet another lens through which scholars might engage with the dilemmas of educational democracy more broadly.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

2. See, for example, Elliot Eisner, "Standards for American Schools," *Phi Delta Kappa*, vol. 76, no. 10 (1995): 758–764; and Gary Orfield, Susan E. Eaton, and the Harvard Project on School Desegregation, *Dismantling Desegregation* (New York: New Press, 1996).

3. Arendt scholars will note that I gloss over the fact that Arendt herself rejected the use of the public in schools (see Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* [New York: Penguin Books, 1968], pp. 173–196). I address this issue elsewhere in a work in progress. In brief, Arendt essentially argues, for assorted reasons, that the practice of the public is not a "learned" practice. This is an extremely problematic idea, however, one that leads to a number of contradictions in her work. Ultimately, I argue that it is an essentially untenable position. Here I simply assume, for reasons of focus and limited space, that the public is, in fact, a practice that must be learned like any other.

4. David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

5. Michael Apple and James Beane, "The Case for Democratic Schools," in *Democratic Schools*, ed. James Beane and Michael Apple (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1995), p. 5. This book will be cited as *DS* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. To name just a few, see James W. Fraser, *Reading, Writing, and Justice: School Reform as if Democracy Matters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Walter C. Parker, "Curriculum for Democracy," in *Democracy, Education, and the Schools*, ed. Roger Soder (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996); and Douglas J. Simpson and Michael J. B. Jackson, *Educational Reform: A Deweyan Perspective* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

7. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), p. 87.

8. See, especially, John Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982); and Craig Cunningham, "Unique Potential: A Metaphor for John Dewey's Later Conception of the Self," *Educational Theory*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1994): 211–224. In this very general overview, I do not address the changes in Dewey's thought over time on this issue, as noted by Cunningham.

9. I engage in a more detailed analysis of Dewey's model of democracy in Aaron Schutz, "John Dewey's Conundrum: Can Democratic Schools Empower?" *Teachers College Record* (in press).

10. See, for example, John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, GA: Swallow Press, 1927), p. 185.

11. Dewey was at least theoretically open to the possibility that even the most cherished of his values might need to change in response to what he learned through events and actions in the world. Yet, at the same time, there is an underlying tension between this pragmatism and his core faith in a particular vision of democracy. Despite his rejection of abstract visions of democracy, the outlines of a model of democracy can nonetheless be discerned in his work, and it is this vision, interpreted in myriad ways, that remains influential today. I examine an aspect of Dewey's utopian impulse in more detail in Aaron Schutz, "John Dewey and the

'Paradox of Size': Some Limitations of Teaching for Local Democracy" (paper presented at a conference of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1999).

12. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 229.

13. Hannah Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), p. 20.

14. See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), pp. 382, 387, 427, 441, and 471. This book will be cited as *OT* in the text for all subsequent references.

15. See, for example, John Dewey, "Freedom and Culture," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 178.

16. In fact, as I note below, Arendt at times rejected *all* means/ends thinking, fearing that we would inevitably begin to believe that the ends would justify the means.

17. Maxine Greene, in "Exclusions and Awakenings," in *Learning from Our Lives*, ed. Anna Neumann and Penelope L. Peterson (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), p. 22, argues that Dewey never really understood tragedy.

18. Actually, Arendt argued that what she was promoting was *more* egalitarian than democracy, or majority rule, as she said the Greeks defined this word. The public was, instead, a form of what she called "isonomy," or, as she argued in *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 30, "no rule," "whose outstanding characteristic among the forms of government, as the ancients had enumerated them, was that the notion of rule . . . was entirely absent from it." I use the term "democracy" here, nonetheless, for reasons of simplicity and familiarity.

19. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 178. This book will be cited as *HC* in the text for all subsequent references.

20. I extrapolate somewhat here on her definition of "strength" as she defines this in *The Human Condition*. She discusses only individuals there, but clearly, a group in which individuals were merely fulfilling roles they were assigned would be acting collectively in strength and not in power. This issue is intertwined with her discussions of "violence," which I do not address here.

21. Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), pp. 140–141.

22. Cunningham, "Unique Potential," p. 220.

23. Susan Seigel and Virginia Rockwood, "Democratic Education, Student Empowerment, and Community Service: Theory and Practice," *Equity and Excellence in Education*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1993): 65–70.

24. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 137.

25. See Eleanor Honig Skoller, *The In-Between of Writing: Experience and Experiment in Drabble, Duras, and Arendt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

26. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 25. This book will be cited as *MDT* in the text for all subsequent references.

27. Certainly, work like that of Nel Noddings would imply this; see, for example, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

28. Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," p. 317.

29. Actually, Arendt's writings are contradictory in different places about whether she thought scientific "truths" were of a *fundamentally* different kind than everyday opinions.

30. Some of Arendt's commentators, like Ronald Beiner, have argued that Arendt shifted over her lifetime from perceiving "judgment" as something undertaken by actors in the midst of public action to an activity reserved for spectators who can view all sides of the fray coolly from a distance. Although this is surely true to some extent, attempts to argue that judgment could somehow be evacuated from Arendt's vision of the public reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the public itself. Even though the actor, in the heat of engagement, has neither the time to reflect nor the broad and nuanced view of a spectator, she must nonetheless engage in a more evanescent form of judgment as she acts, taking into account the multiple opinions that surround her and the contingent characteristics of her historical moment.

31. Dewey did focus on a similar, but nonetheless distinct, issue: the problematic separation of "thinking" from "action" and the ways in which this led, in his view, to a class distinction between those who "thought" and those who "worked," the latter doing the bidding of the former (see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 255).

32. See Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Conception of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), who grapples with whether Arendt did in fact believe in extrahuman social forces.

33. This is laid out many times in Dewey's work, for example, in *Democracy and Education*. The simplicity of my summary belies the complexity of his discussions of this issue, however.

34. Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, p. 151. I do not get into the full complexities of Arendt's arguments around this issue here.

35. Space does not allow a fuller analysis of the complexity of Arendt's discussion of "making" and politics and the problems with "means/end" thinking, nor is this complexity relevant to my discussion. But I will offer a few additional points for those who are interested: Arendt drew from the ancient Greeks a Platonic conception of "work" and of "making," in which an individual creates a durable object by holding an ideal and unchanging model in her mind. According to Arendt, then, "what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator" as a model "and precedes the actual work process" (*The Human Condition*, pp. 140–141). Largely because of this understanding of work, she believed that "an end, once it is attained, ceases to be an end and loses its capacity to guide and justify the choice of means, or organize and produce them" (*ibid.*, pp. 141–142). This, therefore, is another reason why her theory of "action" avoided any effort to achieve concrete ends.

Dewey took great issue with similar ideas when he met them in his own time. He argued that one does not simply aim for a static ideal in work; instead, one reconstructs one's aims and one's means continually through interaction with one's envi-

ronment. Furthermore, Dewey remained unconcerned about the achievement of ends in politics, noting that the “consummation” of a stretch of activity only leads one to see new aims one had not seen before. Thus, he would have rejected nearly everything that, for Arendt, went under the label of “work.” (One wonders if Arendt ever actually built something herself.) See, for example, Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chap. 8.

Arendt also argued that one should not use “means/ends” logic with respect to political action because “as long as we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody’s using all means to pursue recognized ends” (*The Human Condition*, p. 229). Dewey would see this as an extremely problematic separation of facts from values, which, he argued convincingly, was not required by (in fact, was impossible within) means/end thinking. See, for example, Dewey’s relatively succinct “Theory of Valuation,” in *Later Works*, ed. Boydston.

36. Dewey, “Human Nature and Conduct,” p. 181. See also Dewey, “Freedom and Culture,” p. 105.

37. Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 2.

38. Although Beck does, in fact, recommend more local democracy as part of the solution.

39. West, *American Evasion*, pp. 229–230. An important part of West’s argument arises out of his religious commitments. I am not sure these are necessary to make his argument, however.

40. See, for example, Michele Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching* (New York: New Press, 1997).

41. See, for example, citations of Arendt in Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); and Harry C. Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

42. Melissa Bass, “Towards a New Theory and Practice of Civic Education: An Evaluation of Public Achievement” (master’s thesis, University of Minnesota, 1995), p. 1; available at: <http://www.cpn.org/sections/topics/youth>. This work will be cited as “Evaluation” in the text for all subsequent references.

43. Melissa Bass et al., *Making the Rules: A Public Achievement Guidebook* (St. Paul, MN: Project Public Life, 1994); online manual accessed December 12, 1998, at: <http://www.cpn.org/sections/topics/youth/stories-studies/makingrules.1.html>. This guidebook will be cited as *MTR* in the text for all subsequent references.

44. Robert Hildreth et al., *Building Worlds, Transforming Lives, Making History* (Minneapolis: Center for Democracy and Citizenship, 1998), p. 18; emphasis added.

45. See Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

46. Hildreth et al., *Building Worlds*, p. 102.

47. This implies that there is a multiplicity of different publics, each with different levels of safety and trust; in fact, it contests the very idea of a simple binary between public and private. For a discussion of a related issue, see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).



48. Boyte and Kari, *Building America*, p. 176.

49. Hildreth et al., *Building Worlds*, p. 2.

50. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 173. I have engaged in a more detailed discussion of this and other contradictions in Arendt's writings in Aaron Schutz, "Theory as Performative Pedagogy: Three Faces of Hannah Arendt," currently in review. Note that even the epigraph seems to implicitly assume that public action is the avenue for solving practical problems.

51. Charles C. Euchner, *Extraordinary Politics: How Protest and Dissent Are Changing American Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996). In Aaron Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces' in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene," *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1999): 77–98, and in Schutz, "John Dewey's Conundrum," I argue that both Arendt's and Dewey's visions of democracy are in fact designed, at least, to serve middle- to upper-class professionals and are not at all culturally neutral.

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