

Strandbrink, Peter, *Civic Education & Liberal democracy: Making Post-Normative Citizens in Normative Political Spaces*. San Jose: Palgrave Macmillan; Palgrave Studies in Global Citizenship Education and Democracy, 2017.

This book aims to deconstruct or at least gradually expose tension in civic and citizenship education. This tension – which is approached from many different angles by authors’ empirical, conceptual and normative analysis – seems to be both inherent (conceptually) and (re)produced (inside specific national educational spaces and more generally as an effect of liberal democracies). *Inherent*, as understood here, is the tension ingrained in concepts themselves: concepts of civics and citizenship, institutionalized education, statehood, knowledge, values and worldview, normativity and lastly (but most importantly) in the *concept of pedagogical transferral* of knowledge, values and worldviews. In this book, while covering a wide array of topics – one thing remains only briefly unarticulated: the fact that it is not enough to specify values/worldviews, concepts of democracy, liberalism, multiculturalism, tolerance, ... : but to provide (or specify) *means* (curriculum, syllabus, textbooks, institutions), *procedures* (ways of pedagogical discourse that enable transferral, including time frames, the age of student subjected to programme) and *ends* (educational goals, standardized national and international tests) of pedagogical transferral of civic contents. The same goes for ambiguities – conflict and inner conceptual tensions are thus transferred alongside the *curricular contents*.

Inherent tension is, within itself, part of the *building blocks* for civic and citizenship education. And (re)produced tension is perceived differently because it seems more dependent on narrow historical, national and international context – this “type of tension” is being (re)produced on the level of states and specific educational systems. This tension seems “optional”. It arrives from – in the authors opinion – unrealistic expectations of institutionalized education. The perception of the educational system as a “saviour” from backwardness, parochialism, chauvinism and other (undesired) ideologies is not new. These (false) expectations derive from some simple determinants of modern educational systems: the most

important being their massiveness and impressive reach. Educational systems process entire generations for decades on end. It is not shocking that states and stakeholders would turn to mandatory education when trying to reproduce/change populations' dispositions. Or as Strandbrink puts it:

All kinds of states and governments use education to encourage pupils and citizens to absorb and embrace prevailing values and civic, normative, religious, ideological, and ethical content. As soon as comprehensive systems of public education are established, they provide a primary arena for states' and stakeholders' ambitions /.../ to provide normative, worldview-elaborating instruction intended to inspire allegiance, commitment, cohesion, and a sense of community on a massive scale across populations. (2017, p. vi).

Before we move the presented *duality in tension* forward, it is sensible to present some of the most intriguing observations and argumentations in the book. Even though a significant part of Strandbrink's work oscillates in common-sense topics, he puts great effort into elaborating on trivial presumptions. He also contributes, to some extent, to conceptual flexibility by pushing matters of political and educational theory out of their rightful domiciles. He seems to switch, with no observable effort, between questions of normativity in liberal democratic societies as political spaces and normativity in the educational sense (normative in this case as compared to factual education). Lucid remarks, which are worth mentioning, are not imminently impressive, but create a convincing patchwork of combinations and affiliations:

Uneasy ambivalence at the heart of civic-normative education. Uneasy ambivalence as can be observed conceptually or pragmatically is not ground-breaking. But the author goes further than usual narratives of "conceptual dilemmas" like citizenship education vs. patriotic education, embracing national culture vs. promoting multiculturalism or dilemmas leaking out of traditional dichotomies like liberal-conservative, emancipatory-repressive, local-cosmopolitan, national-international, ... (for example Štrajn, 2004; Kodelja, 2011) He moves out of this circular solution searching and turns to powerlessness of civic-normative education: even if we solved dilemmas - there is no sustainable way for implementing the "canonized civics and citizenship" into educational processes. Firstly, because state authorities in Strandbrink's opinion do not possess such power over teaching input, processes and contents as they are customarily attributed with. And even if they did – they do not "control" the relation: pedagogical input à pupil/citizen output. In civic and citizenship education, more than in other educational areas, seemingly normative frames tend to

be merged with other educational contents, local contexts, families, peers, other institutions like churches and clubs. All these together mould pupils into “citizens”. The merging of influences also decreases the chance of the evaluation of educational work:

When it comes to teaching young people which good life to espouse and how to become normatively good and proper citizens/residents of national community, there are no neutral criteria for a priori defining or later evaluating if this goal has been fulfilled, or indeed if fulfilment has been caused by education or other influences... (2017, p. viii).

On the same notion: Normative civic education normally flows from a nation state’s cultural needs (in Strandbrink’s articulation: the normative fabric of society) which entails that more critical, post-national or post-cultural ideals of communal cohabitation are almost impossible to envision in normative education.

“Overlooked” selectiveness, out-sourcing of bad values and normative bias. In order to educationally compose pupils into citizens, there must be a factual and value-ridden framework designed into which citizens-to-be are supposed to “enter”. Accompanying good lives, desirable values and worldviews, good ideological stances; there also exist bad and undesirable lifestyles, values, worldviews (so educational distinction is possible). In normative civic and citizenship education, this endeavour presents problematic turns on two levels: the first one; how can cosmopolitanism, plurality, diversity and tolerance be pedagogic upon in neutral and normative ways? And the second one: How can a set of good/bad values be selected? The first remark Strandbrink makes is that – no matter the value-set choice – it cannot be neutral and can hardly present itself as such. It is deeply tied to historical, social, national, generational context and can be immensely exclusive to marginalized social groups. In the authors’ words:

When European states or the European Commission evoke Europe’s impressive heritage of good values, there is normally no mention of its shadowy legacy of bad values. It is unnecessary to stretch the imagination very far to realise that Europe, normatively speaking, has a strong track record also of misogyny, colonialism, authoritarianism, exploitation, fascism, racism, /.../ to mention some of the more shadowy traditions that co-contribute to the European ideological and moral legacy. (2017, p. 74).

It merely exposes the upsides. The downsides (racism, sexism, slavery and so on) are also generally present in educational curricula, but “always located elsewhere, expelled from and foreign to the properly updated identity of European society and civic culture.” (Strandbrink, 2017, p. 74).

This naturalized separation of good (European) and bad, volatile, chauvinist (foreign) has some unforeseen consequences:

If standard European political thinking (including its thinking on normative education) mainly conveys the upside of divergent European ideational and normative legacies, this will cause much of Europe and a significant part of all Europeans to be symbolically placed outside of the European construct. (2017, p. 75).

The elitist notion of civic competence. Strandbrink also briefly considers inequality deeply-seated in the idea of civic and citizenship competencies. Schumpeter (1992, in Strandbrink, 2017) is very explicit when fighting against headless rambling and the infantile reasoning of plebs. This overlook is widely (even if not as abruptly) present in civics and citizenship education. Which is connected to the question of ...

... *Deviance and oddness as the backside of normality:* Institutionalized normative education is designated to support patterns of normality and deviance, averageness and weirdness. Conditions for reaching normality (even in narrow frames of citizenship education) are different for: a white, middle class, working, educated, democratically-minded, well-articulated Jaka *and* for a coloured, uneducated, unemployed, narrow-minded and shy Ahmad. Conditions under which different groups live and practice their citizenship are diverse:

Depending on your cultural, ethical, confessional, social, economic, and educational position, you will be responded to and accommodated differently even by such common core principles like liberty and human dignity. (2017, p. 87).

Elaboration of distinction between maximalist and minimalist conceptualizations of civic and citizenship education. These conceptualizations, rivaling in Europe, entail either a more factual and thin citizenship package (knowledge of institutions, rights and obligations) and a thicker one (involving in democratic deliberation, the idea of active citizenship). Even though this duality is not in itself very conceptually promising, Strandbrink manages to elaborate gracefully. “Thickly” nurtured pupils have to become civically active and are supposed to participate in communal life to be a proper citizen. How do they do that? How much activism is just enough – overboard activism entails radicalism and minimal activism entails passive, undecided (non)citizen. There is a narrow “activity arena” that is appropriate and designated to civic-deliberation – the area is designed for the reproduction of liberal democratic dispositions, but is fenced at prox-

imities: where activism could become terrorism and where a lack of activism could become passivity endangering liberal democratic scenery.

These speculations bring us to closing remarks: In the model of the active universal citizen, there are condensed all fore-mentioned dilemmas, normative agendas and (re)production paths of making/remaking citizens of liberal democracies. Civic and citizenship education in normative political spaces is (to unite unaptly separated notions of inherent/(re) produced tension from the beginning of the review) – *inherently reproductive*. It also “involves” numerous “compressed ambiguities” in universal citizen –the imagined product of normative civic education. Compressed ambiguities derive from second-order concepts scattered (almost) randomly across the curriculum. Second-order concepts (solidarity, equality, justice, allegiance, tolerance, respect) as Strandbrink defines them, are glued to more fundamental conceptions: their function in identity formation is that of adjectives. Fundamental concepts or first-order concepts are more comprehensive and deeply collectively embedded – usually rooted in religion, nationality or political belonging. Impotency of the educational system in civic and citizenship matters is double-layered: first, it arrives from the inherent impossibility of regulating educational input and output. And secondly, it is connected to second-order conceptual patchwork present in attempts to construe normative civic and citizenship education. For now, its primary role is “negative” – sustaining the normative zero. Here, we can again picture a modelled active citizen, designed to behave civically, to vote regularly, to act respectfully, to decide wisely and to deliberate when appropriate. This citizen is democratically sensible, humanitarian (but not excessively), tolerant and open-minded but aware of their roots, the importance of traditional values and social cohesion. Any swing in passivity or radicalism, into carelessness or heated political beliefs is prevented by normative civic education. Any leap into ignorance of public matters or into reckless activism, anarchism, fascism, loud voicing of concerns (may it be boycotting the Israeli national orchestra, squatting on oil platforms or loudly opposing burkinis in a thermal spa) is strongly discouraged and instantly regulated.

Literature

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DOI: [https://www.doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.30\(5-6\)175-179](https://www.doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.30(5-6)175-179)