

*The* INAUGURAL  
SYMPOSIUM:  
DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

**Martha Minow**

**Carter Professor of General Jurisprudence, Harvard University**

**Distinguished Service Professor, Harvard Law School**

*Prepared remarks*

On the occasion of another inauguration, Anna Deavere Smith, American actress, playwright, and professor, called for art. She said: “Art convenes. It is not just inspirational. It is aspirational. It pricks the walls of our compartmentalized minds, opens our hearts, and makes us brave.” I am honored to be part of the inauguration for President Christle Collins Judd, and reach for conversation in the same spirit. Thanks to President Judd and fellow participants, we have this timely chance to “prick the walls of our compartmentalized minds” and bring heart and courage to reflections on “education and democracy.” Democratic governance in societies around the world faces serious challenge; education sits at the crossroads of the information revolution and widening inequalities. The frailties of education increase the fragility of democracy, and yet strengthening each is critical to the other. What steps move toward strength, and what instead makes matters worse?

Democracy is hard work, and often produces poor policies. Playwright George Bernard Shaw was not stretching the truth when he had one of his characters say, “Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few.”<sup>1</sup> The work of self-governance takes time, produces conflicts, and leaves us with few to blame but ourselves. So it is the worst form of government except for all the others.<sup>2</sup>

On top of it all, it’s difficult to keep a democracy. Elections can be rigged. Politicians can take choices away from the voters. And the people can be tempted to surrender

---

<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1903), “Maxims for Revolutionists.”

<sup>2</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, *Hansard*, November 11, 1947.

their power—by failing to vote or by voting for tyrants.<sup>3</sup> Only 4.5% of the world’s population lives in full democracies, and even in those nations, self-governance faces rising gains by authoritarian leaders in Venezuela, Poland, Hungary, the Philippines, and, some would say, the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The founders of the United States understood that “an ignorant people cannot remain a free people and that democracy cannot survive too much ignorance.”<sup>5</sup> The creation of schools was a project embraced in the states and remains an ongoing constitutional commitment, although one fraught with unequal resources and exclusions. The American movement for “common schools” initiated in the 1830s sought to promote political stability, equip more people to earn a living, and enable people to follow the law and transcend differences in religion and background.<sup>6</sup> Yet as initially advanced, the common school ideal excluded enslaved people and children with disabilities. Even after the Civil War, in practice public school systems divided students by race and class.

---

<sup>3</sup> After working to help found the democratic republic of the United States, Benjamin Franklin was asked,

“Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?”  
He replied:  
“A Republic, if you can keep it.”

The response is attributed to Benjamin Franklin, at the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as he left Independence Hall on the final day of deliberation; found in the notes of Dr. James McHenry, one of Maryland’s delegates to the Convention.

McHenry’s notes were first published in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 11, 1906, and the anecdote on p. 618 reads: “A lady asked Dr. Franklin Well Doctor what have we got a republic or a monarchy. A republic replied the Doctor if you can keep it.” When McHenry’s notes were included in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand, vol. 3, appendix A, p. 85 (1911, reprinted 1934), a footnote stated that the date this anecdote was written is uncertain.

<sup>4</sup> Arturo Bris, *Is Democracy in Decline?*, *The Hill* (Feb. 17, 2017), <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/uncategorized/321312-recent-events-highlight-some-shortcomings-of-democracy>; Ari Shapiro, *Decline in Democracy Spreads Across the Globe*, *NPR* (Aug. 3, 2017), <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/03/541432445/decline-in-democracy-spreads-across-the-globe-as-authoritarian-leaders-rise>.

<sup>5</sup> Justice David Souter referring to Thomas Jefferson, in *How to Teach Citizenship in Schools*, *Economist* (Sept. 27, 2017), <https://www.economist.com/news/international/21716250-governments-are-failing-prepare-young-use-their-votes-well-how-teach>.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Minow, *In Brown’s Wake: Legacies of America’s Educational Landmark* 115 (2010).

A sustained legal strategy attacking legally mandated racial segregation in schools yielded official victory in 1954 but triggered resistance, and despite some successes, massive racial separation persists in American schools. Of the fifty-three hundred communities with fewer than one hundred thousand people in this country, at least 90 percent are white, and in large urban districts, upwards of 70% of the public students are nonwhite; over half are poor or nearly poor.<sup>7</sup> Disparities in per-pupil expenditures reflect the sharp differences in local wealth, because most of the country funds schools based on local property taxes. Although a majority of Americans report that integrated schools are a good idea, a majority also agree that “we shouldn’t do anything to promote them.”<sup>8</sup> One commentator reports that now we live in an era of hoarding in which upper middle-class families—those in the top 20% of income—have used zoning laws, schooling, college application procedures, and unpaid internships to pass their opportunities on to their children while making it harder for others to break in.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, it is fair to ask whether people in today’s United States even hold up the ideal, so well stated by John Dewey, that schools should “see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment”?<sup>10</sup> The common school ideal remains necessary for a democratic, diverse society, as each generation needs to develop respect for the rights and responsibilities of every individual and practice working and getting along with people despite differences and disagreements.<sup>11</sup> Yet we are far from embracing this ideal as a guide for practice in the United States. Controversial policy reforms—paying teachers more to teach in schools in poor neighborhoods, making higher education truly affordable, ending exclusionary residential zoning, and replacing reliance on local property taxes with state-wide or even national redistributive financing—could make a difference in educational opportunities.

---

<sup>7</sup> Id. (citing Jennifer L. Hochschild & Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* 25, 27 (2003)). Focusing on New York City, Diane Ravitch concludes: “The education of lower-class children has been from 1805 until the present the most vexing dilemma of the New York public schools.” Ravitch, *supra*, at 401.

<sup>8</sup> Richard D. Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools Through Public School Choice* 42 (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Richard V. Reeves, *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Class is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why that is a Problem, and What to Do About it* (2017); Richard V. Reeves, *The Dream Hoarders: How America’s Top 20 Percent Perpetuates Inequality*, *Boston Review* (Sept. 26, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, *Philosophy of Education*, in *Democracy and Education* 24 (1916).

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald Frug, *City Making: Building communities without building Walls* 182 (2001); Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973: A History of the Public Schools as a Battlefield of Social Change* 401 (1974).

To work, democracy needs effective schools that do even more than instruct students in the value and institutions of a democratic society (though this would be a good start, given that only 36% of Americans can name the three branches of government).<sup>12</sup> Habits and skills of initiative, respect, listening and controlling emotions in the face of disagreement, taking the perspective of others, learning to assess and organize information are presumed by democratic governance, and yet children are born without these abilities and with no knowledge of what life is like under fascism or autocracies. It is better to learn by doing, to use the tools of democracy—to debate controversial issues, to practice disagreeing with respect, to make group decisions over topics that affect oneself; civics education with these features leads to greater political engagement, voting, and higher degrees of acceptance towards people of different backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> These are the themes of John Dewey's educational initiatives and the progressive educational tradition that still animates Sarah Lawrence College; these are the commitments to trust young people to follow their own interests, to take responsibility, and to take up governance of their own classrooms and lives.<sup>14</sup>

At this moment, the distance between these ideals and actual practices around the country is enormous. A global study found that few millennials object to autocracy; only 19% in America report that a military takeover would be illegitimate if the government were incompetent.<sup>15</sup> Not many young people know how, following a worldwide economic depression, people in Italy and Germany turned to fascism in the 1930s and gave power to Mussolini and to Hitler, who appealed to racism, fanaticism, and fear—and created global violence, mass killings, and destruction of communities and democratic ideals. At the same time, recent surveys show that people are much more willing to deliberate than research in political behavior might suggest, and that those most willing to deliberate are exactly those turned off by standard, polarized, interest group politics. If the conventional avenues for participation can involve more

---

<sup>12</sup> Reid Wilson, Only 36 percent of Americans Can Name the Three Branches of Government, Washington Post (Sept. 18, 2014),

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/09/18/only-36-percent-of-americans-can-name-the-three-branches-of-government/?utm\\_term=.352690f50f3b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/09/18/only-36-percent-of-americans-can-name-the-three-branches-of-government/?utm_term=.352690f50f3b).

<sup>13</sup> Id. (citing studies). See also Martha Minow, *supra*, at 145-146; Martha Minow, "Isaac Marks Memorial Lecture: Education for Co-Existence," 44 *Arizona Law Review* 1-29 (2002), reprinted condensed version in *Imagine Co-Existence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*, Antonia Chayes and Martha Minow, eds. (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Feffer, The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism 117-120, 144 (1993).

<sup>15</sup> How to Teach Citizenship in Schools, *The Economist* (Feb. 2, 2017), <https://www.economist.com/news/international/21716250-governments-are-failing-prepare-young-use-their-votes-well-how-teach>.

opportunities for deliberation, many who are disengaged and disaffected might join in the work of self-governance.<sup>16</sup>

Digital resources offer both promise and risk for education, for democracy, and for the connections between them. The Internet, social media, and content available on the web and through search engines bring much of the world's knowledge within reach of more people than ever in human history. Information—and disinformation—are plentiful and a few keystrokes away. This enables people to learn and makes it more difficult for repressive regimes to keep information out of people's reach. The architecture of the Internet also enables people with little cost to find others with similar interests, to share and spread information and views, and to recruit others, because it facilitates one-to-many communication.<sup>17</sup> These features are exemplified by the work of MoveOn and Breitbart News—and also by terrorist recruitment and sexual predators online.<sup>18</sup> Some see in the Arab Spring and public protests in Turkey the power of the Internet to promote democracy, but authoritarian governments have also found the Internet useful for surveillance, intimidation, and purging opposition.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling, Ryan Kennedy, David Lazer, and Anand Sokhey, Who Wants to Deliberate — and Why? HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP09-027, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2009), <http://web.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.asp x?PubId=6772>

<sup>17</sup> Mary C. Joyce, The Democratic Power Shift on the Internet, Internet and Democracy Blog, Berkman Center, (May 14th, 2008), Internet and Democracy Blog, <http://blogs.harvard.edu/idblog/2008/05/14/the-democratic-power-shift-on-the-internet/>.

<sup>18</sup> Id.; J.M. Berger, How Terrorists Recruit Online (and How to Stop It). Brookings, Nov. 9, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/11/09/how-terrorists-recruit-online-and-how-to-stop-it/>; Hal Abelson, Ken Ledeen, Harry Lewis, Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion 229-230 (2008).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Stovcheff and Erik C. Nisbet, Is internet freedom a tool for democracy or authoritarianism?, The Conversation (July 20, 2016), <http://theconversation.com/is-internet-freedom-a-tool-for-democracy-or-authoritarianism-61956>

Research suggests that some tune out of politics with the help of social media and Internet entertainment,<sup>20</sup> but here the Internet simply joins many opportunities for people to avoid political engagement. Both education and democracy are fragile unless people desire—and fight for—political participation, knowledge, debate, critical reasoning, and freedom, whether in governance of their societies and schools, or in design of the Internet.

Education and democracy both enhance human freedom but require rules and structure to work. Both need ground rules. Neither can work amid untrammelled violence, disrespect, and lying. Formal rules and informal norms can guide people to assess claims, and bolster intolerance of intolerance. President Judd's expertise in music, in creativity, and in academic programs underscores the interdependence of practice and freedom. Practicing the predicates of education and democracy—the norms of respect and truth—these are the tasks pricking the walls of our compartmentalized minds, opening our hearts, and making us brave.

---

<sup>20</sup> Id.