# Public Education and Non-statist Imaginaries

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author focuses on the statist imaginary associated with the defence of public education. Drawing on work on the idea of the public sphere, anarchist theory and the politics of movement, she argues that in a world characterised by unprecedented and growing levels of mass migration and displacement, a new, non-statist imaginary is needed. She explores some ways in which such imaginaries can play a role in educational thought and practice.

In the dominant political imaginary behind most discussions of schooling, 'public' (notwithstanding the peculiarly English phenomenon of elite 'public schools') is equated with education controlled and provided by the state. Criticisms of increasing marketisation of educational provision and of the role of the corporate sector in educational services often go hand in hand with a defence of locally provided, democratically accountable state schools. A number of theorists have challenged the neat distinction between the public and the private when it comes to the provision of children's education, whether through demonstrating how public services, including state education, have been 'rearticulated' through the discourse of privatisation (Ball, 2007) or showing how public schools function as private markets (Boyles, 2011). Others have questioned the assumption that private, as opposed to state, provision is necessarily inimical to social justice (Francis et al, 2017) and have explored how aspirations for greater equality and democracy can be expressed and reflected in a range of private educational establishments (Boyask, 2015).

Here I draw attention to another aspect of the political imaginary associated with the assumption of the state reflected in the defence of public education. Specifically, I consider how the contemporary phenomenon of mass migration and displacement may require us to rethink the political frameworks and theories that inform policy debates about the control, provision and content of education.

225

## Public Pedagogy and the Public Sphere

According to United Nations estimates, the number of international migrants reached 258 million in 2017, having grown from 173 million in 2000. According to some estimates, this number could rise to 400 million by 2050 (Institute of Migration, 2010).

There are a number of possible educational responses to this issue, at both the theoretical and the practical level. At the practical, policy level, steps can be taken to ensure that children's right to education, enshrined in international human rights law, is guaranteed for migrant children. In England, this duty is reflected in the legislation concerning local authorities, which states that they 'have a duty to provide suitable full-time education for all children of compulsory school age resident in their area. The education must be appropriate to the child's age, ability, and any special educational needs they may have, regardless of their immigration status.… Being undocumented or having a 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition on a visa does not prevent a child from accessing education' (see Children's Legal Centre, 2017).

These responses, while important, do not address the deeper political problems raised by the question of how the reality of a world of nation states and borders can co-exist with the reality of mass migration. It may seem that re-conceptualising 'the public' and 'public education' is a possibly fruitful way to think about these issues. Several theorists have developed accounts of educational practice as part of the attempt to 'reclaim or reinvigorate the public sphere' (Biesta, 2012). Gert Biesta, for example, draws on Arendt's work on action as a political concept in order to develop a normative and practical idea of public pedagogy that, rather than being conceived as a form of teaching or instruction, or as part of a regime of learning, enacts 'a form of human togetherness characterised by plurality', whereby pedagogical spaces and places can become public (Biesta, 2012, p. 694).

However, as contemporary political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib have noted, the idea of the 'public sphere', both in Habermas' original work and in later critical engagements with his work, was, from its inception, correlated with a territorial state. The defence of a public sphere fulfilling the democratic functions of efficacy and legitimacy was, within this body of work, 'oriented to the prospects of deliberative democracy in a bounded political community' (Fraser, 2007, p. 13), the public in question being identified with the citizenry of the territorial state. Fraser's recent work is an attempt to rethink the notion of the public sphere, preserving its critical functions, in a post-national or transnational world where 'the equation of citizenship, nationality and territorial residence is belied by such phenomena as migrations, diasporas, dual and triple citizenship arrangements, indigenous community membership and patterns of multiple residency'(Fraser, 2007, p. 16).

Similarly, Benhabib (2004, p. 9) acknowledges the 'dilemmas of democratic citizenship in a post-Westphalian world' that are not adequately addressed by the dominant models in political theory which either, with Rawls, take the nation state for granted, or, with Habermas, envisage an expansion of

universalistic claims towards a model of cosmopolitan citizenship, constitutionalised in international law. The question, for Benhabib, is: 'How can democratic voice and public autonomy be reconfigured if we dispense with the faulty ideals of a people's homogeneity and territorial autochtony? Can democratic representation be organized along lines going beyond the nation-state configuration?' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 27).

As Benhabib comments:

> The irony of current political developments is that while state sovereignty in economic, military, and technological domains has been greatly eroded, it is nonetheless vigorously asserted, and national borders, while more porous, are still there to keep out aliens and intruders. The old political structures may have waned but the new political forms of globalization are not yet in sight.
> (Benhabib, 2004, p. 6)

Everyday language around citizens, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – indeed, the very distinctions drawn between these different categories of people – reinforces this political imaginary of the state as a sovereign, territorially bound space, the conceptual contours of which are inseparable from the need to decide who is included in it and who is not.

What are the implications of this imaginary – and of the tensions articulated by Benhabib – for education? There is certainly a lot that teachers can do, and that many are doing, to make their classrooms inclusive and to resist attempts by authorities to comply with the surveillance and policing of migrants. Nando Sigona and Vanessa Hughes (2012), in their research on irregular migrant children in the United Kingdom, describe how teachers feel increasingly under pressure to perform 'immigration control-like tasks' in their dealings with these children.

Yet perhaps in addition to, or as part of, a refusal to perform these tasks, what is needed is a more radical shift that can challenge the political imaginary of the state, in so far as this imaginary is inherently connected to borders and to narratives of exclusion.

Benhabib, arguing that 'all pleas to develop "post-Westphalian" conceptions of sovereignty are ineffective if they do not also address the normative regulation of peoples' movement across territorial boundaries' (2004, p. 3), has suggested an approach to a 'new form of democratic politics', combining 'moral universalism and cosmopolitan federalism' in a way which will negotiate the 'complex relationship between the rights of full membership, democratic voice and territorial residence' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 10). In this world with 'porous borders' and international laws governing naturalisation and citizenship, Benhabib suggests that the newly imagined democratic public sphere 'ought to be understood not as if it were a harmonious given, but rather as a process of self-constitution through more or less conscious struggles of inclusion and exclusion' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 27). The relevant category in this

reimagining of the public sphere is what Benhabib refers to as 'the politics of peoplehood'.

## Schooling and the State

Can education, and schooling, enact or nurture this 'politics of peoplehood' for a world in which the model of the sovereign state and the ideal of the democratic public sphere attached to it are no longer adequate? I want to suggest that our ability to do so, as educators and educational theorists, is restricted by the fact that our educational concepts and discourse are largely bound up with the political imaginary of the state.

This imaginary is reflected and reinforced not only in the language around migration and citizenship, but through academic and policy debates on education which tend to proceed as if the only two choices available are a defence of state education or an endorsement of neoliberal, market-led forms of private educational provision (see Suissa, 2014). The tradition of anarchist theory, especially the social anarchist tradition associated with thinkers like Colin Ward and Paul Goodman, offers different ways to conceptualise and imagine 'the public'. Ward, for example, reflecting on the post-war British context of the struggle for socialism through electoral politics and centralised universal public provision, argued that the political left in Britain 'invested all its fund of social inventiveness in the idea of the state, so that its own traditions of self-help and mutual aid were stifled for lack of ideological oxygen' (Ward, 2011, p. 272). The anarchist tradition is full of both historical examples and political proposals for 'other paths to socialism' (Ward, 2011, p. 172) based on self-government and mutual aid.

This tradition of anarchist thought offers a rich vein of thinking about the kinds of political structures and practices that can enable the flourishing of human freedom and equality in a world in which, as Benhabib puts it (2004, p. 6), 'we are like travellers navigating an unknown terrain with the help of old maps, drawn at a different time and in response to different needs. While the terrain we are traveling on, the world-society of states, has changed, our normative map has not.' Benhabib's project, like Fraser's, is not to offer a new normative map to replace the old one, but to 'contribute to a better understanding of the salient fault-lines of the unknown territory which we are traversing' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 6).

However, I want to suggest that perhaps we *should* be offering a new normative map, and that educational spaces can be places where its contours can be both explored and enacted. Such a map has, in fact, been suggested by Thomas Nail in his work on the historical and conceptual significance of 'the figure of the migrant' (Nail, 2015b). Nail argues that in spite of the fact that migrants now make up a greater proportion of the world's population than ever before in recorded history, 'political theory has yet to take this phenomenon seriously'. To do so, he argues, would require that political theory 'alter its foundational presuppositions' (Nail, 2015c).

### Politics of Movement

Taking the figure of the migrant 'as a primary or constitutive figure of politics' would require 'a whole new theoretical starting point that begins not with stasis and the state, but with the more primary social *movements* that constitute the state, as well as the social alternatives that arise from those same movements' (Nail, 2015c, original italics). Nail calls this theoretical framework 'kinopolitics'. Rather than starting with a set of pre-existing citizens, 'kinopolitics begins with the *flows* of migrants and the ways they have circulated or sedimented into citizens and states – as well as how migrants have constituted a counter-power and alternative to state structures' (Nail, 2015c, original italics).

Nail's work thus goes further than Benhabib's attempt to overcome 'the growing normative incongruities between international human rights norms, particularly as they pertain to the "rights of others" – immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers – and continuing assertions of territorial sovereignty' (Benhabib, 2004, p. 6). Whereas Benhabib endeavours to articulate a version of Kantian cosmopolitan federalism, Nail notes that 'cosmopolitanism is the name often taken by the reactionary forces of states toward "including" migrants' (Nail, 2015a), and suggests an alternative imaginary of 'migrant cosmopolitanism' 'to create nonexpulsive social structures outside such structures of representation' (Nail, 2015a). This imaginary builds on the figure of the migrant as 'the collective name for all the political figures in history who have been territorially, politically, juridically, and economically displaced as a condition of the social expansion of power', and positions this figure as 'the true movers of history and political transformation' (Nail, 2015a).

Historically, as James C. Scott has documented extensively in his work, the dominant political form of the state has, in every era, been made possible through the coercive expulsion and political dispossession of populations who resisted its expansion and control. In understanding this process, it is important to note how dominant historical narratives of civilisation that centre the progression and necessity of the nation state are generally 'historical fable(s)' (Scott, 2009, p. 34) that obscure 'discontinuity, contingency, and fluid identities'. Acknowledging both the partiality of these narratives and the fact that for most of history, 'living in the absence of state structures has been the standard human condition' (Scott, 2009, p. 3) is crucial to grasping the significance of the 'figure of the migrant' and the way that, as Nail puts it, 'every society has its own social illusions of stasis' (Nail, 2015b, p. 13). For, as Scott notes, 'barbarian was another word states used to describe any self-governing, non-subject people' (2009, p. xiii). Connectedly, this shift in perspective allows us to see how migrants have 'produced some pretty incredible collective effects that are completely outside territorial, statist, juridical, and capitalist circuits of social motion (slave and maroon societies, vagabond collectives, workers communes)' (Nail, 2015a).

The history of such movements and social projects can play an important part in our efforts to imagine, through educational encounters, the possibilities of non-statist forms of social organisation.

229

Adopting the perspective of kinopolitics would have several implications for educational thought and practice. Notably, while it is important to acknowledge the possibilities for non-statist forms of public goods, among them education, this does not equate to a call to abolish state schooling. In an age when calls for 'rolling back the state' are generally aligned with an ideological agenda that is hardly likely to further ideals of equality and cooperation, defending state schooling may be one of the crucial ways to mitigate the worst injustices of a structurally unequal socio-economic system. This view is in keeping with Chomsky's insistence that

> the goals of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state
> institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same
> time to pry them open to more meaningful public participation –
> and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much more free society, if the
> appropriate circumstances can be achieved. (Chomsky, 1996, p. 75)

The question, then, is how schools themselves – including state schools – can play a role, through their curriculum and ethos, in 'prying open' these institutions and in fostering the ability to imagine alternatives.

## Citizenship Education or Political Education

One way to approach this question is to reconceptualise the role and meaning of citizenship education in schools. The state schooling system is conceptually and historically tied up with ideals of creating a civic public. Although citizenship education only became a statutory subject in English state schools in 2002, the notion of 'civic' education is built into the conception of the public aims of state education, in a sense clearly captured by this statement from the recent House of Lords Select Committee report: 'One of the first steps on the civic journey is the education system. Education should help young people become active citizens once they understand their role within society and how they can go about improving it' (House of Lords, 2018).

Of course, the concept of citizenship, as a legal status and set of obligations, is by definition statist. At the theoretical level, discussions of the purposes of citizenship education tend to hinge on a distinction between the republican tradition and the liberal tradition, with the former being associated more with an emphasis on active citizenship (see Oldfield, 1990; McLaughlin, 2000; Kisby, 2017). However, even those promoting more participatory forms of citizenship education that emphasise the idea of schools as sites for civic engagement (Kisby, 2017) are, by definition, wedded to a statist political imaginary.

If we are to encourage pedagogical encounters that contribute to imagining and articulating the 'normative map' for a political landscape defined by migration and movement, we need to rethink the idea of 'citizenship education'. For the statist imaginary underpinning this idea leaves no room for reflecting on how states have historically constituted a citizenry through

exclusion and appropriation, or for imagining other, non-statist forms of social life and political action.

Curriculum and policy initiatives around issues of migration and refugees within the framework of statist ideas of citizenship are likely to focus on political models of recognition, inclusion and representation. Valuable as these ideas may be, they do not offer genuinely emancipatory ideals of political organisation for a world without borders. Such ideals, I suggest, can and should feature in political education initiatives designed to confront our current political reality.

Most writers in this field agree that education for democracy should be a key aim of citizenship education. My suggestion that 'citizenship education' be replaced by a far more open-ended and critical form of 'political education' is not a call to abandon the educational project of ensuring that children understand the workings of our current political systems and the democratic values that underpin them. It is, however, a call to allow space within such projects for questioning whether our current systems are fulfilling their democratic function, and for holding open the possibility of imagining radically different forms of social life and political structures.

Thinking through the implications of kinopolitics for education can give rise to many practical suggestions. For example, an engagement with the lived experience of migrants and refugees is clearly a vital element of any educational project with this political orientation. In addition to the work many schools are already doing to include refugee children, a number of contemporary projects, such as Refugee Lives (http://refugeelives.eu/), offer rich resources for engaging with the experience and stories of refugees.

If the broad theme of movement and migration is to play a central role in political education, it is also important to allow space for pedagogical engagement with the idea that in neoliberal post-industrial societies characterised by the 'policy of deliberate precarization' (Bauman, 2000, p. 163), there is an important sense in which 'people today are beginning to have much more in common with migrants than with certain notions of citizenship (grounded in certain social, legal, and political rights)' (Nail, 2015a).

In today's world, the urgent educational and political questions are not just questions about how to accommodate non-citizens within society and how the status of citizenship should and can be extended or renegotiated. They are also about whether it is possible to envisage forms of political organisation that do not constitute themselves in terms of citizenship as a status of belonging to a sedentary and territorially bounded political community.

Migration scholars have noted that at the level of national and international policy debates on the 'crisis' of migration, 'there is currently not much confidence that the three conventional "durable solutions" (local integration, resettlement and return) can address the challenge on the scale needed' (Cohen & Van Hear, 2017, p. 494).

Cohen and Van Hear have defended the need for radical, utopian thinking in this context, and have begun to develop their own utopian proposal. Such

231

radical thinking must surely involve exploring the idea of a world without borders, an idea that has been developed and defended both by theorists and by activists. If schools are to play a role in this, I argue, this idea should be one that children and teachers can explore through pedagogical encounters, as part of a truly 'public' education.

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