

ROBERT J. STARRATT

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP THEORY IN LATE MODERNITY: AN OXYMORON OR IRONIC POSSIBILITY?¹

Abstract. This chapter is intended to enrich and expand scholarly reflection on democratic leadership theory. Leithwood and Duke (1999) make the claim, in their review of the literature on school leadership, that contemporary philosophy of educational administration has made no significant contribution to leadership theory. However, one can argue that contemporary philosophy has indeed implicated educational administration and the assumptions of enlightenment/modern philosophy that support its practice. The chapter begins with the question of the possibility of democratic leadership theory after the postmodern critique of democracy, epistemology and all meta-narratives (Maxcy, 1991). The question is posed whether democratic leadership theory is thereby defeated, or significantly chastened. It goes on to ask whether democratic theory may overcome its own contradictions through a self-consciously ironic pragmatism.

The next section of the paper explores the limits and constraints on leadership theory after Postmodernism. Leadership theory and its proponents have to agree to a continuous evaluation by a hermeneutic of suspicion, a continuous deconstruction of its treatment of power and authority. It has to respond to the unavoidable issues of racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressing ideologies.

INTRODUCTION

I must begin with several qualifications. In referring to ‘democracy’, I am restricting myself to considerations of democracy in the United States, the primary cultural landscape of my work. I recognize that there are many democracies represented by various nation states, and that there is no single interpretation of democracy that applies to all of them. Thus, I do not mean to disparage democracy as it is understood and practiced in other countries. Neither do I mean to disparage other scholarly discussions of education for democracy (e.g., the work organized by Ichilov, 1990) or the leadership of such efforts in other countries. I speak only within the American context; scholars from other democracies may find some useful applications of my analysis, but I offer no initial expectations that that will be the case.

The political form of democracy in the United States is representative democracy where the people exercise their sovereignty in electing citizens to represent them at various levels of government (Tarcov, 1996); however, there is another traditional usage of the word that refers to more social forms of democratic living together as equals under the law, citizens with moral bonds to one another, yet each free to pursue one’s own interests. When I speak about democratic leadership, I wish to include both the political and more socio-cultural senses of the term.

In what follows, there will be a lot of criticism about schooling in the United States. This criticism differs from the criticism that teachers and administrators face in the press on a regular basis: teachers are lazy, administrators are indecisive and incompetent, students can do whatever they want in school, there are no

standards, courses lack rigor, and so forth. The criticism offered in this paper is of a different nature. It is a criticism of the way schooling in general is carried out in this country; it is a criticism of some of the purposes schools are asked to serve. It is a criticism of how schools trivialize learning and waste so much of the time of youngsters. I am well aware that schools are served by dedicated and well-meaning educators, people who consciously or unconsciously work against all the obstacles that schools present to learning, against all the ways that schools humiliate children, and who succeed in making learning interesting and fulfilling for children. I am not criticizing the educators. My target is the institutional form, the political form, and the cultural form that schools take; that is what makes me ask the question about the moral possibility of leading these institutions democratically. I raise the question of the morality of an educator claiming to lead a school, when what schools do to altogether too many teachers and children is indefensible. And, of course, the question comes back to me as well, as a professor of educational administration. Is my participation in the preparation of educators to 'lead' schools implicated in an immoral charade?

My argument suggests that a qualified form of democratic leadership of schools is not only possible, but necessary. The argument for a qualified form of democratic leadership can be supported –within the philosophical tradition of American Pragmatism, especially as found in John Dewey. The argument goes on to link Dewey's Pragmatism to the concept of constructivism as that has been recently developed in the sociology of knowledge and culture. I argue, however, that constructivist theory must include the process of deconstruction as a necessary component of the constructivist sociology and psychology of learning, in order to develop a qualified theory of democratic leadership for those practicing school administration. The argument includes the category of irony as employed by a contemporary spokesman of pragmatism, Richard Rorty (1989), for the ironic sense employs deconstruction even while it attempts a pragmatic construction of a response to the social and political context.

DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The history of democratic political theory in the United States has seen a continuous argument over the meaning of democracy and over the appropriate institutional forms it might take. The Founders sought, on the one hand, to avoid the tyranny of the rule of a small elite over the masses, and on the other, to avoid the anarchy of rule by the masses. Representative government was their compromise between those two extremes. As Barber (1998) noted, "The compromise of representation permitted the many to choose the few, but vested governing power in the few, thereby filtering out the passions and prejudices of the sovereign many" (p. 162).

The Founders, however, had inherited both a religious and an Enlightenment view of human nature. For them, human nature was a fixed philosophical concept; human nature followed "natural" laws. The Founders' religious background, together with their study of the history of republics, led them to believe that passion in humans tended to rule the rational side of humans' nature, thus leading to a repetitive cycle of tyranny, revolution, the growth of new tyrannies and further

revolutions in the political history of nations and republics. Their Enlightenment background tended to wed them to the primacy of the individual over the social in human affairs. The authors of the Federalist Papers resolved the problem of designing a self-governing democratic republic, populated by self-interested individuals and governed by passions, by promoting a republic driven by economic and political self-interest. They gambled that, in a republic, where various factions of individuals promoted competing economic interests, these factions would impose checks and balances on each other's power and influence over the representatives. The Founders also carefully divided the governing power among three branches of government, so that each would act as a check on the others. Further, a two-party political system would come to represent a variety of viewpoints, thus allowing competing voices to be heard and to influence public policy.

Shklar (1991) also points out that the Founders represented a class of men who saw liberty as the opposite of servitude. Liberty, from their perspective, was grounded in people's ability to work for themselves, to earn good livings through hard work. By building up personal wealth, individuals earned the liberties that wealth can provide. With wealth, people had the liberty to pursue the finer things in life and had periods of leisure to enjoy social and cultural involvements. They would earn the right to be called "free men" through their work. Their work was an expression of their citizenship in a democratic economy where men were free to pursue personal wealth. Shklar would not have us think that the Founders were interested so much in political democracy, where people would spend much of their time debating contested public policies. That was an occupation for politicians, the ones they elected to do this work. Ordinary citizens had their work to do, namely to secure those liberties they could by engaging in wealth-producing work.

Shklar (1991) went on to point out that the unity of this republic was not a unity of blood, of tribal affinity, of traditions, or of interests. The unity of the republic was based upon the guarantee of equal rights. Everyone in this democratic republic was protected by the state, by virtue of their citizenship, from having these guaranteed rights infringed upon. It was a democracy of citizens with equal rights, rights that enabled them to pursue their personal interests as long as they did not illegally interfere with the rights of their fellow citizens. In the minds of some contemporary scholars, this view of democracy falls far short of a more communal, fraternal, collaborative expression of democracy.

Barber (1998) is perhaps correct in his perspective on the fate of democracy. The founding of the United States defined both a point of origin and a destiny. Democracy, as defined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, was not a clearly defined and commonly accepted doctrine, but much more an "... artificial ideal. Not something to be built upon but something to be brought into being and accomplished over time." (Barber, 1998, p. 167). Shklar (1991) maintained that a fuller expression of democracy was achieved primarily through the courts, rather than through legislation, as various groups sought to have their rights, guaranteed under the constitution, but denied in social and political practice, affirmed and validated.

The meaning of democracy has been debated extensively in a recent flurry of publications in the 1980s and 1990s (Allen & Regan, 1998; Barber, 1984, 1988; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Burns & Burns, 1991; Elkin & Soltan, 1993; Elshtain, 1995; Hunter, 1994; Kymlicka, 1995; Marty, 1997; Sandel, 1996, 1998). The liveliness of the debate and the diversity of voices leads Charles Taylor (1998, p. 214) to comment, "I think we suffer in modern philosophy from an absence of alternative models: models of how people can associate and be bonded together in difference, without abstracting from these differences." Marty (1997) similarly believes that the debate about democracy is not resolvable by reasoned arguments in conditions of postmodernity. It is, he claimed, no longer possible to find a common ground in rational argument, eighteenth century style. He cites the earlier work of John Courtney Murray (1960, p. 130): "The fact today is not simply that we hold different views but that we have become different types of men (sic), with different styles of interior life."

So where does that leave the professor of Educational Administration who is promoting the notion of leadership of democratic schools? One can stand on the sidelines pointing out all the ways schools are not democratic. One can also engage in the use of democratic rhetoric in courses and in essays without bothering to ground that rhetoric in a well thought-through analysis of democracy that might be taught and practiced in schools. If I have no theory as a professor, however tentative, to ground my teaching and writing, then I am left with a purely functionalist basis for teaching my students. Herein lies the problem; there is no intellectual or moral justification available in functionalism, other than it is in some senses effective. At the same time, I cannot ignore the critique of schools and the critique of the leadership of all social institutions in the United States, as I try to build such a theory. Therefore, I have to try to uncover deeper values and different perspectives than those provided in an "eighteenth century style" rational argument. In the next section, I will try to lay out some premises for such a theory.

FIVE PREMISES FOR A QUALIFIED THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The first premise is there is a philosophical tradition, older than the Enlightenment, that asserts the intrinsically social nature of human beings. This argument may have some appeal to a broad range of people. The position is well articulated by Charles Taylor (1998, p. 214):

It is the idea of humanity as something to be realized, not in each individual human being, but rather in communion between all humans. The essence of humanity is not something which even in principle a single human being could realize in his or her life. And this is not because of the finitude and limitation of this life, since we couldn't make up for the limitation of one by laying other lives, as it were, along side it, until human variety is exhausted. The fullness of humanity comes not from the adding of differences, but from the exchange and communion between them. They achieve fullness not separately but together.

Taylor goes on to elaborate using the metaphor of an orchestra. Musicians create the full richness of the music in the space between them. This position does not deny relationships of power among humans, but power from this perspective can

have a positive as well as a negative quality. This position offers a positive power between people to create something that no one could alone. This position seems compatible with an expansive view of democracy, and indeed with a view of learning.

The second premise is that, as Marty (1997) suggests, I accept the incommensurability of rational attempts at interpretations of democracy. I back away from attempting a conclusive, rational argument for democratic, educational leadership, and focus instead on the work in front of us. That work flows from our mutual need to share a common, public space, since we are all tossed together. That common space is productively occupied by our stories, not by our rationalizations of our convictions about theories of democracy. We will find common ground in stories about our lives and our communities, stories that will generate bonds of affection and sentiment. Instead of seeking to become a community in which we share uniform commitments to common goals, values, and cultural expression, we might seek a more modest goal of accommodation and acquiescence so that we can collectively get on with our public lives. We do not, as Marty (1997) counsels us, need to demand consensus as the all-compelling principle of politics, but rather honor differences of perspectives and interpretation in the interests of arriving at more modest agreements about sharing the public space while living within our own community of preference. The phrase “*e pluribus unum*” can mean a limited unity for the pragmatic exigencies of public life, while maintaining a rich diversity of plural communities where deep human fulfillment can be found. Sharing in public life with more modest expectations may soften the jagged edge of difference and indeed generate bonds of civility, respect, and even caring. While this pragmatic posture may be embraced in the present, it is open to the future possibility (but not necessity) of stronger bonds of community based more on sentiments of loyalty and appreciation than on rational arguments over principle.

The third premise is that any form of democratic living requires “civic virtue”; namely the ability to forego, at least on some occasions, self-interest on behalf of a particular other, or on behalf of a more general common good. Democratic living does not automatically happen because one has read a treatise on democracy and is intellectually convinced of its logic. Democratic living requires a suppression of the impulses of greed, impatience, lust, and psychological projection, in favour of a mature acting out of a generous portion of altruism. Such civic virtue is learned. Families and other social institutions must socialize the young into habits of civic virtue. As Barber (1998, p. 163) commented, “the actualization of liberty required much more than being born”. We may have certain rights that are ours by birth, but birthrights do not equate to the ability to exercise them. That requires a person educated in the arts of citizenship (Galston, 1995). Democracy is a moral as well as a political and social enterprise. It has to take account of the cruelties and humiliations and hypocrisy of its past as a warning of the self-delusional possibilities of its future.

The fourth premise is that at present, at least, democracy as participation in communal self-governance can be enacted in its most generous sense at the local level, in small communities, in small organizations like schools, neighbourhood churches, synagogues, mosques, voluntary associations, and professional groups.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1160-3>

The Ethical Dimensions of School Leadership

Begley, P.T.; Johansson, O. (Eds.)

2003, XX, 238 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1160-3