

PREFACE

In terms of normative formation of populations, public education is a powerful but not neutral place of instruction. Nor is it (contrary to common assumptions and affirmative political rhetoric) a particularly susceptible domain for successful policy dissemination and identity proliferation by states and stakeholders. Those in control of public comprehensive education are always eager to invest it with instruction on certain specific political–moral–ideological worldviews and good life frameworks, but the direction and content of this instruction rarely unfold in predictable patterns or in keeping with directives. Nor are the directives themselves typically very crisp or coherent. Still, throughout Europe, the politics of normative (which in this study mainly equals civic, religious, and ethical normative identity fostering) education clearly hinges on the ideas that nation-state governments are consolidated political entities, that directives are unequivocal, and adequate civic–normative teaching thus readied for conveyance to pupils, that is, citizens-to-be.

This study begins from the less typically embraced notion that lack of predictability is a standard precondition for normative instruction in any comprehensive system of public education. On this note, few directors of civic–normative education anywhere can claim to be endowed with the kind of authority over teaching input, processes, content-matter, or outcomes they are customarily attributed with. In fact, I will argue that liberal democratic states—as essentially culturally, ideologically, interest- and identity-wise composite entities—are strictly speaking not even in

charge of who they are themselves. There is of course variation in the sense that some regimes, systems, and governments are at least superficially better at reaching their stated civic goals. But how should ‘success’ in this area be assessed in the first place? To manage to convey certain mind-sets on core normative issues or standards of value to mass populations through public education (as is the cardinal purpose of states, governments, and stakeholders active in the sphere everywhere) is arguably not very liberal; nor liberal democratic. Liberal democracies’ desire to mould pupils’ thinking in matters of culture, identity, self-perception, and shared social communality is thus an ambivalent phenomenon. As will be shown between these covers, there is no easy escape from this ambivalence.

If we take the notion that all societies are functionally required to reproduce their core worldviews seriously, there is no essential difference between liberal democratic and other forms of government. 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 not only to impart to their citizens-to-be factual and cognitive training and development but also to provide normative and worldview-elaborating instruction intended to inspire allegiance, commitment, cohesion, and a sense of community on a massive scale across populations. This is typically carried out by designing curricula, textbooks, teacher training, educational programmes, and other elements in ways that transmit certain identity-supportive narratives and distinctions, normally valorising national traits, symbols, legacies, conceptions of communality, and versions of propriety and the good life. The lion’s share of civic and citizenship skills subject to national comprehensive instruction normally flows from nation-state’s cultural needs, articulated so as to tie into the conceived normative fabric of society. On this logic, more critical, cosmopolitan, post-national/-cultural/-political ideals of communal cohabitation and interaction are harder to envision in European civic or normative education as it typically engages a firm delimitation of acceptable politics that does not extend as far as to encompass these theoretical territories.

What constitutes normative—as compared to factual—education is, furthermore, a disputable question. It is common scholarly practice

today to argue that the chances of presenting normatively ‘neutral’ and culturally ‘independent’ scientific narratives of complex human or social phenomena are slim, at best. This does not mean that all expressions of scholarly knowledge are necessarily relative or biased, but rather that earlier epistemic ideals of cognitive pureness and neutrality have by and large been transcended as social epistemological evaluation has become less naturalistic and positivistic. If anything, the times seem to be marked by an inexorable acceleration of both social and intellectual patterns of multiplicity, plurality, divergence, and differentiation. This makes it increasingly difficult to uphold old-style facts/norms’ distinctions that draw on uniformity and convergence. In social science—which, alongside religion, history, and geography, has traditionally been one of the major school subjects figuring in states’ and stakeholders’ ambitions to reproduce societal normative patterns—the majority view seems to be that old-style ‘factuality’ is no longer a viable scholarly ethos.

Nonetheless, a generic logic of educational statehood suggests itself here, seemingly enabling states and stakeholders to intentionally condition their populations’ mind-sets in a vital identity-formatting sense. Or is at least expressive of states’ legitimate desire to do so. Again, if this regimen was authoritative and uncontroversial—that is, if state and state/stakeholder structures were actually able to control civic–normative education and through schooling cultivate or realise the civic–normative goals they ultimately favoured in the minds of young citizens-to-be, and by so doing eventually consolidating and calibrating the value matrixes endorsed by entire populations—then this study would be effectively pointless. As things stand, however, each step in the complicated funnelling of views, beliefs, tenets, and values through the standard scheme is logically, institutionally, and conceptually precarious. Beneath the formal standard model, a plurality of tenuous and conflict-ridden perspectives ferments. Approached from this angle, it seems that mainstream social and educational thinking is typically too keen to affirm the standard model. The majority of scholarly conversations and research dealing with civic–normative education seemingly buys into the standard model, insufficiently noting that in the field of worldview constitution and political–ideological identity-making states and state/stakeholder structures are seldom (if ever) as unified, unequivocal, or monolithic as they make themselves out to be. For scholarship on liberal democracy, this is a cognitive and theoretical mainstay, which is, however, yet to make any

substantial inroads into established research on civic–normative schooling. Instead, the dominant scholarly environment is permeated by a tacit affirmation of states’ own conceptions and rhetoric of their prowess to follow through on the funnelling of core values, worldviews, and good life enunciations through a correspondingly mechanistic view of its institutional powers and logic. A core intention of this study is to question and destabilise this essentially flawed idea of contemporary statehood. In terms of state/stakeholder, policy, institutional, and government assessment, important educational scholarly environments seem not to have kept up with intellectual and theoretical advances in adjacent fields of social scientific research. The most ingrained educational approaches to policy still seem to imply that states are what they claim to be and possess the commanding powers they like to flaunt, that is, constitute well-demarcated, coherent, and stable deliberating and governing entities capable of moving their civic worlds and citizen bodies on cue, according to intention and prediction.

But even as this scheme—that is, the typical setup of liberal democratic educational regimes—may potentially capture educational practice and aspiration in other fields, there are reasons to set civic–normative educational enculturation apart. When it comes to teaching young people which good life to espouse and how to become normatively good and proper citizens/residents of a 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—such as cultural exposure, peer interaction, family or upbringing, art, literature, associational life, churches, sports, individual mentality, ethnical background, social class environment, social activism, media, work, travelling experiences, etc. We should perhaps not be too eager to embrace evaluative language on this score since the notion of success implies that there is sufficient agreement and convergence of views on what it signifies. Even if we for a moment assumed that views in a certain historical setting converged so that only one reading of ultimate normative goals was considered possible—and there was a conjunctive scale according to which goal fulfilment could easily be measured in place—what would be the nature of this society and political culture? If civic–normative aspirations and tenets can really only play out in one direction, how can this society adapt or evolve? How can it cultivate novelty, originality, innovation, or be dynamic?

I assume that it cannot. Still, a drive towards uniformity is no stranger to European educational discourse, which pushes measurability to a hitherto unknown extent without, however, seeming to realise that measurability is predicated on ends-convergence. In the absence of unambiguous goals, it remains fuzzy what is being measured, regardless of the level of methodological rigour and sophistication that otherwise obtains. An interesting critical view of civic education under authoritative political regimes that will be touched on further below suggests itself here. If the efficacy of civic–normative education depends on the convergence and precision of the civic–normative goals it transmits, it should conceivably be easier to conduct it best in normatively well-aligned societies and polities, that is, settings marked by political singularity and uniformity, not plurality. (An interesting offshoot from the core themes of the study would be to analyse if more singularly propended nations in terms of civic–normative setup or political–cultural uniformity are likely to score higher in non-normative education, since they conceivably maintain less space for cultural divergence and social complexity.)

In the context of liberal democratic teaching, there is—withstanding a marked discursive and ideational predisposition to assume the contrary—no strong agreement within nation-states or between national cultures concerning the proper constitution or logic of civic propriety. Instead, there is normally abundant political–ideological, social, and popular variation in any liberal democratic society on this decisive point. This study argues that this plurality cannot converge by reference to the lexical meaning of value-laden words and concepts, such as liberty, equality, rights of expression or congregation, secularism, tolerance, fairness, reciprocity, altruism, justice, solidarity, allegiance, or dignity. Even as the nominal logic of these words seems to suggest that they have precise and restricted meanings, they belong to a class of second-order normative concepts that (as will be shown below) need anchorage in foundational first-order views to make sense in public political discourse and educational debate. Thus, standard phrasings of primary normative goals for civic education in liberal democracy—for instance ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ‘rule of law’, or ‘respect of minority needs’—accomplish very little in terms of spelling out exactly how social groups, individual pupils, or citizens-to-be should understand their connection to the society and polity they are part of. Standard educational approaches to civic identity matrixes are extremely vague. On the one hand, this may be construed

as an educational shortcoming: something to rectify and qualify through further political and scholarly efforts. This clearly candidates for the default perspective on the part of European educational statehood (and possibly of global educational scholarship). On the other hand, however, this vagueness may also be construed as a corollary of the logic of liberal democratic statehood in and of itself. On this view, it would be unreasonable to expect it to go away.

This book draws on the argument that the civic–normative–ethical ‘core’ qualities on which educational identity construction typically turns are not very fixed. There is core-invoking *argumentation* on different political and institutional levels in all European countries but a hard and shared European kernel of normativity (or post-normativity, as it were) or manifest definition of the good life is hard to find and even harder to defend.¹ The ramifications of this are momentous. The critique of the standard model developed in this contribution follows two routes. One addresses the inherent volatility and unreliability of transmission of civic–normative content between acting levels in educational regimes. This first critical tack aims to unpack institutional ambiguities and misconceptions in the standard model and by extension in wider arrays of thinking and conduct organised around it. A second, more fundamental critique concerns the composite and open-ended character of civic–normative identity formation in liberal democratic society. The entrenched view that civic discourse, policy, and schooling typically play off a central substantial identity conception is subjected to critical scrutiny and reappraisal. The argument turns on the idea that the directing state or state/stakeholder structure in European civic education (or any other policy area) must be reinterpreted not only in practical terms but also modally. If liberal democratic statehood essentially fails to conform to the tacit demands placed on it by mechanistic state theory then some other theoretical baseline needs to be defined that describes it in less idealistic and condensed terms. One crucial pair of binaries that need reconsideration on this count is formulated in the study as monolithic ↔ dispersed statehood versus uniform ↔ plural society.

Another vital discussion below is how normativity in and of itself—that is which scales, levels, and relationships of the normative to apply—plays out in contexts of civic and religious education. There is a proclivity, I contend, in mainstream public, scholarly, and political addresses of normative education and enculturation to frame the ‘zero

position' out of which virtues such as tolerance, recognition, respect, and neutralism in the face of plural worldview maintenance and good life promotion may be articulated and pursued in liberal democratic civic-normative education inadequately. On this view, standard approaches to equilibrrious tolerance seem to overstate the case for normative, cultural, and political independence in the context of assessing the overriding normative logic of public comprehensive education. To be tolerant of course implies an element of authoritative supremacy in relation to whatever normative arrays are at hand.

Not only a fine and innocent thing, it thus seems obvious how tolerance is also the practice of the strong and powerful towards the weak and marginal. To exemplify: even as doctrines of cultural multiplicity and religious diversity in contemporary Russia are forwarded as expressive of tolerance and cohesion different roles are ascribed to different confessions and cultures on this conceptualisation. It is typically not expected of Moslems, Buddhists, Jews, and various ethnic minorities to practice tolerance vis-à-vis core Orthodox Christian Slavic parts of the Russian population. Instead, they are expected to suffer tolerance from the nation-state and its kernel constituency. In this example, ideals and practices of tolerance are thus hardly possible to associate equally with all parts of the Russian social, ethnical, ethical, cultural, or confessional panorama. Not, mind you, in the sense that some groups, states, or polities are tolerant and some intolerant (which may of course also be the case) but in the more important sense that the logic of tolerance is entangled and associated with political and institutional patterns of unequally distributed power. On this logic, tolerance as a value and social disposition plays out asymmetrically and means different things for different, identifiable parts of the Russian population and culture. But as will be argued below the meaning and logic of any concept also co-vary with the ideological and confessional use it is put to. Conceptual practices should thus not only be read in a lexical and grammatical tense but also as playing out in illocutionary, thematic conversations and dialogues that contribute to defining them.

On this line of critique, current ideals of tolerance and neutralism are not normatively independent, but bearers of certain configurations of social dominance and political power. From this perspective, the discourse of tolerance and neutrality is post-normative in the sense of removing from sight the inevitable cultural bias of the zero position.

The zero position's invocation of ethical procedure and closure should thus be reconsidered. To get a critical handle on this problem—and the overall logic of civic–normative education—a quantum of philosophical unveiling is thus required. To account properly for this additional, relational aspect of tolerance, we have to move beyond the simple imagery of social and cultural pluralism; that is, questioning the conventional idea that social and political identities and relationships normally are capable of arranging themselves independently of power. The more structured, circumspective view of tolerance in educational and social life I develop below draws on the contrary notion that these relationships by theoretical necessity unfold in ways have little to do with liberty or chance.

As the tenor of contemporary educational research is typically not concerned with the nexus of problems indicated here, there are certain possibilities for knowledge expansion in this contribution. The cardinal problem in the following is not (even indirectly) how to provide as refined or effective programmes of civic–normative education (or tools for evaluation of those same programmes) to European states and pupils as possible but how to understand liberal democratic educational statehood in and of itself. Reaching beyond the practical/pedagogical/ideological dimension of civic education in this way will ultimately also open a critical window to unpacking and re-elucidating the logic and conduct of concrete civic–normative education—but with greater than standard hopes of avoiding to surreptitiously re-stating states' own preferred views of the goals and methods that should characterise this undertaking. In other words: taking greater than customary pains to avoid becoming inadvertently entangled in political–normative agendas by naturalising political power grids and under-articulating the societal visions of the good life they are conditioned on.

In this vein, this contribution is concerned to cultivate a sufficient critical distance between social–educational scholarship and normative state-driven politics. I remain doubtful if this is done enough in particularly educational research, lodged as it is between hard political–ideological–institutional priorities derived from educational statehood and authoritative curricula and more ambient scholarly epistemic ideals. It will be for the interested reader in the end to assess to which extent this ambition has been successful.

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NOTE

1. Even though the study is dedicated to critical analysis of different dimensions and instances of standard European public comprehensive normative (that is: civic, religious, and ethical) education, I am aware that references to American politics, culture, history, theory, philosophy, and education are sprinkled across and tap into many of the arguments I develop. Even as the primary analytical task is to scrutinise parts of contemporary *European* civic education, the step is not far to its American counterpart—a situation betokened by an amount of overlapping theoretical girding and referencing. It would have been an overloaded title of the book, but in practice the investigation may hence be said to concern European (*cum* American *cum* Western) civic education and liberal democracy.

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