HOW TOQUEVILLE'S THEORY OF THE "TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY" CAN BENEFIT SOCIAL JUSTICE PEDAGOGIES

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> In my opinion the main evil of the present democratic institutions of the United States does not arise from their weakness, but from their overpowering strength; and I am not so much alarmed at the excessive liberty which reigns in that country as at the very inadequate securities which exist against tyranny.
>
> If ever the free institutions of America are destroyed, that event may be attributed to the unlimited power of the majority.
>
> I know of no country where there prevails, in general, less independence of mind and less true freedom of discussion than in America.
>
> Alexis de Tocqueville
> *Democracy in America*[1]

> In our age the power of majorities tends to become arbitrary and absolute. And therefore, it may well be that to limit the power of majorities, to dispute their moral authority, to deflect their impact, to dissolve their force, is now the most important task of those who care for liberty.
>
> Walter Lippmann
> *American Inquisitors*[2]

Introduction

Tocqueville's concept of the "tyranny of the majority" can benefit social justice pedagogies owing to its capacity to illuminate the silent, invisible character of hegemonic power. As many critical pedagogues have pointed out, this silent and invisible power seeps not only into the public spaces of education, but also into the private spaces of students' identities—as well as our own—shaping both what is discussed and what tends to go un-discussed within American classrooms. This essay explores the pedagogical potential of Tocqueville's concept of the tyranny of the majority—that is, how it can be theorized in ways that enable us to critically understand the "anti-democratic" silences and civic self-conceptions of majority privilege.

Teachers dedicated to the multicultural project and committed to renegotiating the pedagogical formation of identity are at times bedeviled by their students' expressions of silence, ignorance, hostility or indifference to the critical inquiries they initiate into the reproduction of "American" identities (national, civic, or mythological). Critical pedagogues invite inquiry into the production of identity in a thousand different and valid ways, but it seems that

one principle guides all of these efforts. Democratic education relies precisely on the developmental and transforming quality of critical self-reflection. As such, resistance or hostility to any education premised on this quality stands in opposition to the first principle of democratic political education.[3] Such hegemonic attitudes and patterns of behavior deserve the strictest possible scrutiny.

To the extent teachers create the conditions in which dialogical contests over meaning can occur in their classrooms, they will encounter these resistances in various guises as a difficult-to-name social power, difficult since it is defined both by an absence of dialogue and by a corresponding absence of a passion to know. For educators to gain insight into the development of a democratic personality formation, it is useful to examine the attitudes and behavioral traits of its ontological opposite: the fascist personality. The epistemic basis of the fascist personality formation, defined by its fear of and hostility toward critical self-reflection, finds expression in the character dispositions that Tocqueville ascribes to Americans in relation to what he calls the tyranny of the majority.[4]

This essay develops the "tyranny of the majority" as a pedagogical motif that can incite novel inquiries into the conditioning of students' cultural identities. I contend that such moments of critical reflection may become particularly acute for people whose identities, opinions and common sense is privileged by virtue of majority status. Tocqueville's theory of the tyranny of the majority ought to be integrated into our pedagogical quivers because it is endowed, as a heuristic device, with the power to rupture the frequently unconscious normalization of majority opinion and privilege internalized by many students. Since Tocqueville's concept of the tyranny of the majority reflects a cogent analysis of those specific majoritarian habits of mind which contribute to the degeneration of democracy into tyranny, the concept is capable of bringing into relief the despotic, proto-fascist potential of American democracy.[5]

First, a brief historical context is provided for understanding Tocqueville's concept of the tyranny of the majority. I also suggest that, pedagogically conceived, the concept can be situated to sharpen the question of what it means to educate both democratic and fascist personalities as disparate models of civic identity. In the second section, drawing upon my experiences teaching controversial issues and upon the work of other contributors to the literature addressing problematic aspects of silence in the classroom,[6] I explore how the "tyranny of the majority" can be deployed as a pedagogical motif to carry out the tasks of a democratic political education.

The Tyranny of the Majority and the Fascist Potential of American Democracy

One plausible way of judging the relative integrity of a self-identified democratic culture is to take a critical look at the quality and scope of the dialogue that does or does not take place within its bounds. After extensive travel throughout the United States (US) in 1831–32, Tocqueville observed that it was the most democratic nation on earth, but that dimensions of its national character could, under certain circumstances, devolve toward despotism. In no way did Tocqueville regard this devolution as inevitable. However, what Tocqueville feared most about the future of democracy in the US was that its burgeoning commercial culture, combined with the values of radical individualism, would unleash privatizing forces that would overwhelm the civic values which sustained the idea of citizenship and shared visions of a common good.[7]

Tocqueville wrote that the beginning stages of this civic devolution could be discerned in the US. He described an historical context in which a new and potentially dangerous form of power showed evidence of (in)forming the values and mental habits of the dominant culture. Tocqueville boldly claimed that the American people all too often displayed a troubling degree of conformity and self-adoration. Below he identifies a set of learned character traits not easily reconciled with the core democratic values:

> In America, the majority draws a formidable ring around thought….One would think at first glance that in America minds were all formed on the same model, so much do they follow exactly the same paths….The majority thus lives amid a perpetual adoration of itself; only foreigners or experience can make certain truths reach the ears of Americans.[8]

Of course, these traits may be seen as the product of a prior desire not to inquire and not to enjoy the subversive beauty of questioning itself. Tocqueville interpreted this absence of democratic sensibilities paradoxically as the consequence of the principle of majority rule. As one of the foundational principles of democracy, Tocqueville warned that the authority and moral legitimacy of majority rule could be vitiated when grounded (as it was) in a species of individualism that transformed commercial values into religious objects of devotion. The rise of such a civic vacuum would create the conditions in which democracy might devolve into tyranny or fascism. According to Roger Boesche

> Tocqueville was suggesting that democracy has two key characteristics in tension with each other: citizenship and commerce. Over time there is a tendency for the demands and pleasures of the commercial ethic to undermine the ethic of

> citizenship, that is, for private interests to bring an eclipse of public life.[9]

Tocqueville's analysis leads us to speculate that when civic identification has been atrophied and devalued by capitalist values to the point of virtual non-existence within a formal democracy, individual members within such a regime will likely display personality traits (such as an aversion to critical inquiry) that are consistent with what I would call a fascist identity formation.

As is well known, Tocqueville was impressed by the proliferation of private or civic associations that honeycombed the US and regarded these institutions as the most promising development of modern democracy. "In democratic countries" he wrote, "the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on its progress."[10] Institutions of civil society exist as a primary means through which democratic citizens can escape a sense of powerlessness by forming into political bodies that transcend their isolated individual existences. Tocqueville realized that a nation of isolated individuals alienated from one another would be a nation of ciphers and not citizens, a situation where no countervailing power would exist to temper the totalizing effects of an atomistic, profit-seeking commercial culture.

In mapping the devolution of democracy into tyranny, Toqueville's discussion seems remarkably prescient from our present perspective:

> I want to imagine with what new features despotism could be produced in the world. I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his private friends constitute the whole human species for him. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, he is close to them, but he does not see them; he touches them, but he does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country. Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate.[11]

This "immense and tutelary power" did not assume any form that resembled the past, it was indeed a friendly form of oppression no longer reliant on brute physical force or violence to secure its ends, but rather "in the tyranny of democratic republics…the body is left free, and the soul is enslaved."[12] Study of Tocqueville thus provides a locus for democratic educators to pose questions for their students' critical self-reflection: Might they—and we—be "enslaved" owing to a social conditioning that can repress the possibility of viable civic engagement as well as the desirability of critical

thought? How to introduce and engage these and other questions without re-inscribing new forms of silencing?

Here we recall Paulo Freire's assertion that it is an act of violence to thwart any movement toward inquiry: "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence."[13] Perhaps the most destructive consequence of tyranny majority is that its one-dimensional power structures modes of perception and discourse for individuals who thereby learn to attach little or no meaning to the value of inquiry, to say nothing about the effort toward independent formation of thought itself.

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville struggles with how best to label this incipient form of oppression he saw emerging. He proposed "despotism" and "tyranny" as terms that approximated what he was describing, but noted that these were inadequate to capture its overall character. Robert Paxton's study of fascism offers nuanced definitions of the various phases and gradations of this cultural form. Instructively for the purposes of this essay, Paxton claims that recent events in the US approximate the initial phases of fascist cultural development. Among fascism's "mobilizing passions" Paxton includes the following examples (in italics, I note contemporary US equivalents of these passions, ideas and perceptions):

> the belief that one's group is a victim, a sentiment that justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against its enemies, both internal and external (*Guantanamo/Jose Padilla*);
>
> the need for authority by natural chiefs (always male), culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group's historical destiny (*President Bush's millenarian pronouncements justifying war*);
>
> the superiority of the leader's instincts over abstract and universal reason (*President Bush's repudiation of the United Nations*);
>
> the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group's success (*"Shock and Awe" "Bring 'em on"*);
>
> the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group's prowess within a Darwinian struggle (*invasion/occupation of Iraq, Abu Ghraib)*.[14]

These broadly drawn conceptual affinities are not introduced in order to declare that the US is a fascist culture, but rather that prototypical dimensions of fascist cultural norms can be seen in evidence both in official US policies and in observable individual and group behaviors within the majority culture.

Classroom Manifestations of the Tyranny of the Majority

To clarify how the concept of the tyranny of the majority can benefit social justice pedagogies, I discuss examples from my own classroom experiences as well as from Megan Boler's recent article, "Teaching for Hope: The Ethics of Shattering World Views," which viscerally describes her encounters with the classroom consequences of what could be called the tyranny of the majority.[15]

Recently I taught a course in philosophy of education which was presented to undergraduates as an excursion into the most controversial issues facing American education and society. Students were told at the outset of the course that the primary learning would not grow out of the *content* of the course per se, but rather out of the *process*—how we would encounter and negotiate the many sharp differences which were bound to emerge as we studied the war in Iraq and same-sex marriage, to name two controversial issues we were going to tackle. Despite my hopes for raising the collective level of dialogue in the classroom, we failed, I think, to reach these higher levels. It was as if a silent covenant had been enacted among the students *to be silent* in order to avoid further outbreaks of civic discord and division.

A sizeable portion of the problem of why students can be adverse to civic controversy may be attributable to the power and influence of the tyranny of the majority: whereby a "formidable ring is drawn around thought," a subtle yet powerful force which constricts what is deemed permissible to think and to say out loud. In discussing both the war in Iraq and same-sex marriage, many students who had been vocal in earlier meetings exhibited a stony silence precisely when my intent was to deepen and extend classroom dialogue.

Finally, students in the course wrote position papers on the legal and moral principles at stake in the debates over same-sex marriage. These papers were based on excerpts from two opposing US Supreme Court rulings, *Bowers v. Hartwick* (1986) legalizing the criminalization of sodomy by the state, and *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) which reversed *Bowers*.[16] Surprisingly, many of these "private" papers favored same-sex marriage: this immediately raised the question in my mind why so few students had articulated their opinions in class. Such a discrepancy between what students were willing to discuss in their papers and what they were unwilling to discuss in the classroom was striking.

The same general tendency also held true for discussions about the war in Iraq. Again, a discrepancy emerged between private and public expression: those few students who were willing to express opposition or doubts about the war did so privately in their papers, but never or rarely in the more public realm of the classroom. While many factors are involved in explaining this phenomenon, including, of course, my own biases, limitations and personality as a teacher, I believe Tocqueville's theory of the tyranny of the majority goes

a long distance in placing these types of inhibitions to thought and speech in a beneficial political context. Inhibitions to class dialogue may also be traced in part to learned notions of "civility" that work against the possibility of discussing culturally divisive issues. Cris Mayo's contention that these norms of civility often disguise the operation of privilege when they are used to ignore or smooth over the consideration of controversial issues, speaks eloquently to this Tocquevillian theme.[17]

In her article, Boler enumerates three main categories of students that educators tend to encounter: first, there are those who are excited by attempting critical theory; second, there are those who angrily and vocally resist attempts to do critical theory; and third, there are those who "appear disaffected, already sufficiently numb so that (our) attempts to ask them to rethink the world encounter only vacant and dull stares."[18] Her analysis focuses on the second category of vocal, angry resisters to critical theory. Students like "Sam," while not silent like the third group, still embody central aspects of Tocqueville's theory and reinforce the benefits of introducing a "foreign" set of eyes to the project of negotiating one's relation to the national identity.

Based on her reflections regarding "Sam," Boler writes that "I am learning to accept that people will not go where they don't want to go."[19] While this is no doubt true in one sense, in another, I think it is also true that critical pedagogy sets for itself the ambitious task of encouraging students to go where they didn't previously want to go. As civic educators we are engaged in "educating student desires" to value and desire things that they didn't value or desire before (such as critical inquiry or the vision of a common good). I am persuaded that the Sam's of the world could be encouraged to understand the purposes of critical self-reflection and understand the indebtedness of democracy to transformational education if they studied a theory, namely the "tyranny of the majority," which well describes the very problem they personify.

The third category of student to which Boler refers, the "silent majority," is not explicitly treated in her article, yet this group is most illustrative for inquiry into contemporary expressions of the tyranny of the majority. It is significant that two of Boler's key principles share important conceptual affinities with Tocqueville's theory. First, the tyranny of the majority, as an interpretive frame, could accurately be located under the canopy of her "pedagogy of discomfort" since it can be made to pose questions about truth and power which tend to provoke discomfort among the privileged.[20] Theorized in this manner as a resource to incite novel reflection and dialogue about identity-formation, students may begin to render visible some of the invisible powers of the dominant hegemony.

Secondly, Tocqueville's observations about the conformist tendencies of US culture, generally describes what Boler refers to as "inscribed habits of

emotional inattention."[21] This concept captures the operative essence of the tyranny of the majority: dominant ways of seeing—and not seeing—become unconsciously internalized making them all the more difficult to identify and transcend. These learned and often unconscious patterns of inattention help to reproduce the kind of heteronomous individuals that Tocqueville feared most: "idiotic citizens" whose scope of civic discourse is anchored firmly and, as he said, "sweetly," in a set of self-congratulatory platitudes. These platitudes—as constitutive elements of the majority culture's thematic universe—embody contradictions that ought to become sites of critical analysis precisely for the educative discomfort such inquiries are capable of eliciting. Mayo articulates how the dominant forms of civility are anything but neutral:

> If the capacity to be civil is important for justice, so too is the practice of incivility….If incivility gives pause, those pauses draw attention to the silences and active ignorances that preceded the pause. By raising hackles, incivility points to the obscured play of power that previously kept hackles down. Done correctly—and this is a difficulty—incivility entails spreading the social discomfort to everyone, the very discomfort usually borne by the hackle-raisers.[22]

Conclusion

Exploring the uses of Tocqueville's theory of the tyranny of the majority from a pedagogical standpoint raises difficult questions about the role teachers ought to play in the process of reproducing democratic civic identities. Pedagogically understood as a means for identifying and questioning the silences, opinions and common sense of the majority culture, the concept offers educators a theoretical compass for prying open new space from which to interrogate the moral authority and privileges which accrue from any given majority-derived status. For democratically-minded educators, the ethical dilemmas that will accompany efforts to "dispute the moral authority," "deflect the impact," and "dissolve the force" of popular majorities will be legion—yet another reason to subject majoritarian habits of mind to radical scrutiny. Despite these difficulties the project is crucial: For any society that calls itself democratic must be awake to the perils of majority rule and awake to the power of education to help create citizens capable of thinking critically about their own congratulatory and mythological self-conceptions.

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 241–249. The primary though not exclusive discussion of majority tyranny is found in Volume I, Part II, Chapter 7; 235–249.

2. Walter Lippmann, "The Teacher and the Rule of Majorities," in *American Inquisitors* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 2005), 111. Lippmann's critical appraisal of the Scopes Trial and other educational fundamentalisms during the 1920s was recently republished, and outlines the ethical dilemmas teachers face when they frontally challenge, as he believes they should, the power, opinions and truths of popular majorities.

3. For two useful statements of what a democratic education means in relation to a fascist education and to fascist cultural norms generally, see Heinz Sunker, "After Auschwitz: The Quest for a Democratic Education," in *Education and Fascism: Political Identity and Social Education in Nazi Germany,* eds. Heinz Sunker and Hans-Uwe Otto (Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press, 1997), 161–170; and Theodor Adorno, "Education After Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191–204.

4. The cultural characteristics of the Nazi personality formation are impressively described in Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

5. In this essay I equate despotism and tyranny with fascism. In reference to the US, Bertram Gross prefers to say *pre*-fascist rather than *proto*-fascist. It is worth recalling that fascism emerged incrementally in Italy and Germany through their electoral systems in the context of the monopolization and corporatization of their economies. See, Bertram Gross, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1980).

6. I agree with those who argue that some silences in classroom situations may be positively agentic, and that the dichotomy between silence and speech ought to be problematized, however, the focus in this essay is on how certain character traits of the majority culture, including that of "silence," masks hostility to inquiry itself. See Huey-li Li, "Rethinking Silencing Silences," in *Democratic Dialogues in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence,* ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 69–86.

7. For a comprehensive treatment of this theme, see Roger Boesche, "Privatization and the Eclipse of Public Life," in *Theories of Tyranny: From Plato to Arendt* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press), 211–216.

8. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 244–45.

9. Boesche, "Privatization and the Eclipse of Public Life," 213.

10. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 492.

11. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663.

12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 244.

13. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 2003), 85.

14. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 218–220.

15. Megan Boler, "Teaching for Hope: The Ethics of Shattering World Views," in *Teaching, Loving and Learning: Reclaiming Passion in Educational Practice* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2004), 117–131.

16. For a transdisciplinary text which focuses on same-sex marriage, see Andrew Sullivan, ed., *Same-Sex Marriage Pro and Con: A Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 86–120.

17. Cris Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 78–87.

18. Boler, "Teaching for Hope," 117.

19. Boler, "Teaching for Hope," 123.

20. Boler, "Teaching for Hope," 120–123.

21. Boler, "Teaching for Hope," 122.

22. Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents," 86.