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RECONSTITUTING THE DEMOCRATIC SUBJECT: SEXUALITY, SCHOOLING, AND CITIZENSHIP

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ABSTRACT. In this review essay, Robert Rhoads and Shannon Calderone consider how liberalism, as a guiding principle for school practices and educational policy making, reinforces heteronormativity through a doctrine of professed neutrality that circumscribes sexual expression and subjectivity. Through an analysis of Carol Vincent's *Social Justice, Education, and Identity*; Cris Mayo's *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies*; and Susan Birden's *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*, Rhoads and Calderone argue that the form of liberalism espoused by schools operates in contradiction to any pluralistic democratic project emphasizing social justice and inclusion of the "other." By highlighting the discursive contradictions and structural conditions of schools that lead to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer students, each book proposes alternative forms of educational praxis that attempt to disrupt the liberal status quo of schools. Such praxis, Rhoads and Calderone argue, offers possibilities for new forms of democratic organization within schools that conform with a more robust and inclusive notion of citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

As historical arbiters in the transmission of knowledge, schools have played a strategic role on behalf of the state by fomenting within children an appreciation for civic virtue and the obligations of citizenship. Steeped within a discourse of liberalism, the educational practices found within schools are configured according to a universalizing notion of formal membership in the state as well as to an a priori belief in the equal distribution of substantive rights to all participating denizens. Echoing the democratic projects of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Dewey, U.S. schools in particular are viewed as sites in which individualism is tempered to an extent by an appreciation for relational coexistence; that is, individual freedoms are equally dispensed by the state in return for contributions to a stable social milieu.

Yet this notion of citizenship has not gone uncontested. Globalization, the resurgence in local and regional differences, and the rise of identity politics have served to undermine the universalizing discourse of liberalism. Indeed, Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition" speaks to the shortcomings of liberalism's equal rights discourse by arguing that in its shortsightedness, liberalism fails to account for the importance of recognition within the context of group difference. As Taylor explains, "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need."¹ Nowhere is this more poignantly displayed than in schools, where so-called "democratic pluralism" is conceived as a utilitarian principle, and where visible and invisible demarcations of difference are constrained and ultimately erased by

1. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

the need to maintain a Durkheimian sociability and a limited conception of citizenship.

Schools, of course, are situated within the larger social context and hence are not immune to the political pressures of the broader social body. Consequently, the individual rights that liberalism purportedly protects often are superseded by the goal of social stability, as defined by individual power brokers and dominant social groups. The United States offers an excellent example of this, especially when one examines the ways in which political discourse serves to marginalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) people. For example, in the 2004 presidential campaign George W. Bush took full advantage of homophobia within the broader society — he in fact fueled homophobia as well — by making clear his opposition to “gay marriage.” Homophobia enacted by the president only serves to solidify opposition to any attempt by public organizations such as schools to advance more inclusive educational programs.

Similarly, public reticence over hiring openly gay and lesbian teachers within schools reflects yet another example of ways in which “difference” is perceived as a direct threat to social stability. In October 2004, South Carolina State Representative Jim DeMint stood before his state’s senate and spoke out against the hiring of openly gay teachers within the South Carolina public school system. Claiming that his comments were consistent with those of the South Carolina Republican Party, DeMint argued that suitable classroom teachers are “folks who are teaching to represent *our* values.”² From these comments, DeMint made clear the power of the political stage to demonize those value systems that appear contradictory to the dominance of heteronormativity — the idea that being heterosexual is “normal” and being anything other than heterosexual is perverse.

Homophobia, routinely enacted within the public realm, serves to reinforce heteronormativity, limiting public organizations such as schools from advancing more inclusive educational programs. What are we conveying to both schools and LGBTQ students and staff when barriers are created to limit their access to rights and opportunities commonly assumed by heterosexuals, such as the right to marry, or the right to employment based on a fair assessment of one’s talents and skills, or the opportunity to work or study in a supportive environment? Can one be defined as a full citizen if she or he does not fully share in the rights and

2. Riley Snorton, “GLSEN Decries South Carolina Rep., Jim DeMint’s Comments,” *Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network*, October 18, 2004; <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/1727.html>.

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privileges that others commonly assume? Although liberalism purports to protect individual subjectivity, clearly some subjectivities matter more than others.

Tensions between individual subjectivity and the liberal discourse and practices evident in schools serve as the exploratory nexus for the three books under review here: Carol Vincent's edited collection *Social Justice, Education, and Identity*,³ Cris Mayo's *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies*,⁴ and Susan Birden's *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*.⁵ Each book offers a different perspective on the structural, cultural, and social impediments to embracing diverse sexual identities within schools. Together, they offer important insights into the ways in which schools circumscribe the educational experiences of LGBTQ students. Through separate explorations of the discursive and structural features of schools, as produced through policy making, curricular decision making, and the performative operations of schools and classrooms, these books offer a compelling critique of heteronormative violence imposed upon LGBTQ populations. More specifically, each author considers the theoretical and pragmatic effects that the cooptation of liberal or conventional models of citizenship have for schools as well as alternatives for an educational praxis that, not only serves to reaffirm and valorize sexual subjectivities, but also reconfigures our existing notions of what it means to foster democratic schooling.

Central to our analysis are two key intersecting issues: (1) the important role educational institutions (schools in particular) play in fostering particular notions of citizenship and, consequently, promoting specific kinds of citizens; and (2) the influence of liberalism in framing educational norms and practices and the related failure of liberal thought to adequately account for identity differences, particularly those differences related to LGBTQ subjectivities.⁶

CITIZENSHIP, DIVERSITY, AND LGBTQ SUBJECTIVITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOLS

If we are to account for the shortcomings present within a conventional model of citizenship rooted in liberalism, we must also account for the ways in which this understanding of citizenship plays out within schools. As key institutional agents in civic assimilation, the prospect that schools, particularly public schools, may be intentionally employed to shape society is one that has captured the

3. Carol Vincent, ed., *Social Justice, Education and Identity* (New York: RoutledgeFarmer, 2003). This work will be cited as *SJ* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Cris Mayo, *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). This work will be cited as *DSS* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Susan Birden, *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). This work will be cited as *RSI* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. As is the case with the three books we examine here, our focus primarily centers on a critique of liberalism and its influence on schooling and difference. It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide any kind of spirited defense of liberalism and liberal social/political theory, but we do point the readers to two important works that speak to some of the issues we raise. See, for example, John Rawls and his discussion of "justice as fairness" and his neutrality principle ("neutrality of aim") in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Thomas W. Pogge's defense of Rawls in *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).

attention of scholars from a wide range of political and ideological orientations throughout the ages.⁷ Yet education's utility in supporting democratic ends has not come without conflict, particularly as it relates to its functional purposes within the larger society. To draw from Diane Ravitch, should schooling serve as a mechanism for promoting social stability, whereby the needs of individuals are superseded by concerns for the broader social good, or should schools be organized to reflect the pluralistic society in which they are embedded, whereby disadvantages associated with diverse cultural identities and social marginality are addressed?

Liberalism, as both a political philosophy and an organizing paradigm, seeks to limit the tension arising from the conflicting purposes of education. As a theory intent on preserving individual freedom, political equality, and social stability, liberalism purports to maintain neutrality with regard to particular identities (and their related political and ideological positions) by welcoming all legitimate citizens into political processes as bearers of rights and privileges and framing their particularities as private matters.⁸ Although, over time, liberal governments have had to address inequities associated with material wealth, race, and gender by recognizing that *some* distinctions *do* make a difference, liberalism has largely continued to view individual particulars as part of one's private domain, especially when it is convenient for a majority group to do so.

Ideally speaking, the success of liberalism is largely determined by the presumed ability to maintain neutrality within the public sphere. The public sphere operates as a site in which relational values mitigate against the intrusion of private individual interests and particularities. Relational values include a belief in the common good, social stability, and the importance of civic virtue. Discursively understood, relational values must be equated with the collective; that is, relational values are normative values that implicitly and explicitly reflect a majoritarian position, and that are often misleadingly represented as consensus-based. Maintaining normativity is therefore foundational to the social/public concern to guard against the destabilizing effects of individual/private interests imposed within the public sphere.

That which is considered to be normative — including various values, beliefs, and virtues — often is expressed through schooling and school-related structures and practices. In essence, education in general and public schooling in particular are not nearly as neutral as liberal theory would at first seem to suggest. Clearly, underlying a liberal conception of education is a normative vision of the kind of citizen to be developed and the kind of society desired. As Amy Gutmann argues, "education may aim to perfect human nature by developing its potentialities, to deflect it into serving socially useful purposes, or to defeat it by repressing those inclinations that are socially destructive."⁹ Of course, perfecting "human nature,"

7. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1916*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); and Diane Ravitch, "Education and Democracy," in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, eds. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001).

8. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

9. *Ibid.*, 22.

or directing students to “socially useful purposes,” or turning them away from “socially destructive” inclinations all require a particular vision upon which to base such actions. Given the purported neutrality of liberalism, we are left with little choice but to base educational praxis on normativity. Although in reality we know that schools certainly are sites of contestation, the dominance of liberalism leads to the pursuit of stability on the basis of a mythical public consensus, which is really nothing more than that which is normalized by the majority, or the powerful, or both.¹⁰

Within liberal schooling, the particularities of identities are reaffirmed or devalued through what James Sears termed the “reciprocal nature” of social relations/interactions and identity.¹¹ Normative assumptions about identity inscribe social meaning in ways that serve to confirm or deny inclusion within the local community. The ramifications for LGBTQ youth within schools are significant given the public valorization of heterosexuality and narrow conceptions of marriage, family, and personal relationships.

The relevance of sexual subjectivity, the social/cultural/political context of schools, and the implications liberal schooling has for LGBTQ youth form thematic connections for the three books under review. The first of these books, Carol Vincent’s edited volume of twelve essays, titled *Social Justice, Education, and Identity*, seeks to explore the ways in which schools are structurally organized to limit the expression of alternative social identities.¹² In her introduction, Vincent states that several of the volume’s contributors note that “the effect of structural forces and individual agency combine to shape identities” (*SJ*, 5). In effect, identities are constructed in response to the social context in which they are situated, and schools serve as key sites for identity construction. Through curriculum, policy decisions, and the construction of the classroom, identity is shaped, melded, and re-melded in response to the normative values expressed.

By combining Stuart Hall’s work on social identities with Anthony Giddens’s concept of “structuration,” Vincent argues that the task of creating socially just environments within public organizations, such as schools, is a shared responsibility of individual actors and the institutions they comprise. Recognition of the complexity of identity construction and the role of schooling is particularly important to a social justice vision of education and identity, as Vincent explains:

Our understanding of who we are, the others with whom we identify and those with whom we do not, how the social groupings to which we belong are perceived, these factors are now understood to be key in understanding and interrogating the concept of social justice. Education, because of its crucial role in the production and reproduction of particular identities and

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Press, 1978).

11. James Sears, “The Impact of Culture and Ideology on the Construction of Gender and Sexual Identities,” in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. James T. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 145.

12. This volume was produced by members of the British Educational Research Association’s (BERA) Special Interest Group in Social Justice.

social positionings, is a particularly fruitful site in which to consider the playing out, or the performance, of social justice and identity issues. (*SJ*, 2)

In their contribution, "Towards a Sociology of Just Practices: An Analysis of Plural Conceptions of Justice," Alan Cribb and Sharon Gerwitz elaborate on Vincent's initial assertions by distinguishing social justice as "a concern with the principles and norms of social organisation and relationships necessary to achieve, and act upon, equal consideration of all people in their commonalities and differences" (*SJ*, 18). The concept of social justice, therefore, has special significance for educators and for the ways in which schools are ultimately structured. Rather than perceiving social justice as merely a series of principles that underlie the equitable distribution of goods in society, Cribb and Gerwitz argue for a more expansive definition, incorporating cultural as well as associational forms of justice. Toward this end, schools must be structured not only to engage in distributive forms of justice, but they must also be situated to combat cultural injustice through what the authors term "a politics of recognition" (*SJ*, 19). However, for distributive and cultural justice to be meaningfully pursued, schools must have the capacity to engage subordinated groups in the task of reassessing the distributive and cultural practices in place. In other words, for schools to operate in a socially just fashion, administrators, educators, parents, and students must recognize diverse identities and modes of association in an effort to combat marginalization. Moreover, all institutional actors must engage in a daily struggle to ensure that relations and decision-making comply with the principles of social justice.

In another exploration of the barriers to creating socially just schools, Stephen Ball presents two case studies of school choice and the ethical decision making of middle-class British families in order to examine how values affect family deliberations over the placement of their children within public (state) or private (independent) schools. Of particular relevance to his essay, "Social Justice in the Head: Are We All Libertarians Now?" are the ways in which middle-class sensibilities regarding school choice are expressed. Ball's analysis reveals that middle-class families often influence public school placement of their children according to a set of individualized criteria offering "maximal positional advantage for their child" (*SJ*, 33). Based on his findings, the utility of liberal idealism, therefore, is circumscribed by middle-class concerns over maintaining optimal position and social status for their children. As expressed through middle-class value systems, the social good supposedly advanced by liberal schooling is bound by the practical concerns of cost, locality, and potential risk in terms of school quality. According to Ball, the apparent favoring of individual interest over public good among middle-class families points to the differential incentives found within the new educational marketplace:

The values and incentives of market policies give legitimation and impetus to certain actions and values and inhibit and de-legitimise others. The material conditions of the late modern, global economy also play their part in generating certain "necessities" and making other things seem dangerous or frivolous. In other words, values only ever partly float free of their social context. (*SJ*, 47)

The contingency effects of middle-class ideals within the context of the educational marketplace constrain certain democratic principles by which many schools operate. As Ball argues, the exercising of choice within middle-class families is embedded within a matrix of “communal” values offering “coherence between private principles and social identity” (*SJ*, 48). For the most part, liberal conceptions of schooling fail to account for this reality.

The pervasiveness of dominant middle-class norms and values within schools bears upon the ways in which social justice is advanced, particularly with regard to LGBTQ students. Debbie Epstein, Roger Hewitt, Diana Leonard, Melanie Mauthner, and Chris Watkins, in their chapter titled, “Avoiding the Issue: Homophobia, School Policies, and Identities in Secondary Schools,” explore the ways in which homophobia is often treated inconsistently within two single-sex and four coeducational secondary schools in London (*SJ*, 120–136). What they found is that dominant middle-class values embraced by administrators, teachers, and students served to minimize their perceptions of violence enacted against LGBTQ or perceived LGBTQ students. Whereas bullying or explicit prejudice on the basis of race and gender was closely regulated within the schools, homophobia was consistently dismissed or overlooked. The consequences for LGBTQ students are significant. By failing to regulate against violence and harassment enacted against LGBTQ students, while taking action against other overt and covert forms of discrimination, schools legitimize homophobia and undermine the ability of LGBTQ students to develop empowering identities.

In an analysis that also speaks to the role of normativity in schooling, Carrie Paechter, in her chapter, “Masculinities, Femininities, and Physical Education: Bodily Practices as Reified Markers of Community Ownership,” discusses structural barriers to gendered and sexual expression within schools as represented through physical education programs (*SJ*, 137–152). Paechter argues that the physical tasks dictated by contemporary physical education curricula are organized according to a gendered interpretation of appropriate bodily practices. Through participation in gender-based “communities of practice,” male and female children perform gender by engaging in gender-specific physical tasks. Paechter contends that this form of socialization in schools ultimately perpetuates the performative strategies expressed through gender in social situations and interactions. Moreover, these practices translate into reified bodily markers of membership within a “gendered community of practice.” Given that gender and sexual identification are closely associated with one another, noncompliance with the performative demands of either gendered community of practice ultimately serves to subordinate and marginalize those who transgress the traditional boundaries of femininity and masculinity. The dominance of these narrow interpretations of gender, reinforced through the curricular decision making of schools, not only operates to perpetuate normative gender definitions within schools, but also reaffirms heteronormative performance as a mandate for inclusion within schools.

The work of Vincent and her contributors offers insight into the ways in which various identities/subjectivities are constrained within the context of education. As Vincent notes in discussing compulsory education, “Just as we are learning

what it is to be a member of a particular social group, we enter a system which provides running commentary on the development of our skills and abilities, our behavior and attitudes, our families and their lifestyles. This can be affirming for some, but very disabling for others" (*SJ*, 6). The "running commentary" encountered by LGBTQ students in the context of schools is hardly affirming and fails to operate as a neutral expression of liberal schooling. Clearly, some identities matter more than others. If social justice is to have any real meaning, then schools must confront the inequities faced by LGBTQ students. Separate works by Cris Mayo and Susan Birden have such a goal in mind: both explicitly address the limitations of schooling and of how schools handle issues of sexuality.

THE LIMITATIONS OF SCHOOLING AND THE TREATMENT OF SEXUALITY

In her book, *Disputing the Subject of Sex*, Cris Mayo examines the discursive nature of liberal and communitarian political ideology as it relates to sex education within U.S. public schools. Through an analysis of New York State's *Instructional Guide for AIDS Education K-12*, New York City's "Children of the Rainbow" multicultural curriculum guide as well as its "Abstinence Oath" for AIDS educators, the federally funded sex education program *Sex Respect*, and the development of Gay, Straight, and Questioning Alliances in after-school programs, Mayo argues that the collective resistance expressed by community members, parents, and administrators to the introduction of the state-mandated AIDS education curriculum bears striking similarity to liberal and communitarian political discourse.

Mayo argues rather comprehensively that liberalism and communitarianism represent the most common ways in which sexuality is discussed, challenged, and, ultimately, publicly confined. Whereas liberalism represents a theory in which individual freedom, political equality, and social stability are preserved within the public sphere, communitarianism suggests that the autonomous citizen deliberates moral and ethical decisions from a cultural understanding that is consistent with local custom, practice, history, and particular schools of thought. As a consequence, individual decision making is bound by the greater social concerns of the community at large. As Mayo explains,

According to communitarians, individuals do not make the kind of abstract, reflective choices that liberals claim because no one can think from nowhere. They argue that the autonomous liberal citizen does not make abstract choices but rather deliberates from within a deep cultural understanding. In other words, everyone has a view from somewhere. (*DSS*, 11)

She goes on to point out, however, that communitarian ideals are maintained in an ambiguous context at best, as the definition of what is "traditional" or "culturally appropriate" tends to be vaguely understood by community members. Such vagaries also foster greater potential for exclusion when differences — including identity differences — are introduced within the public sphere. Lynda Stone reinforces this criticism in her treatment of liberal democratic notions of society and community and the tendency to value sameness over difference.¹³ Amitai Etzioni's

13. Lynda Stone, "Disavowing Community," in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. Hanan A. Alexander (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993).

work in support of communitarianism seems to add credence to Mayo's concern, as well as to Stone's criticism of the normalizing tendencies of liberal democratic conceptions of community: "Societies, like bicycles, teeter and need continuously to be pulled back to the center."¹⁴ Just like bicycles may "teeter" off the normative track, so too do people, and it appears that schools play a significant role in getting young people, students, back on track.

One of the discursive features common to both liberalism and communitarianism is the capacity to eliminate controversial discourse through rigidly delineated boundaries between public and private spheres. Mayo contends that the application of poststructural theory offers tremendous utility by presenting opportunities to uncover and question the historical inconsistencies produced through discourse on sexuality (and necessarily sexual identity) and schools:

For poststructuralism, the recourse to unquestioned or unquestionable foundations covers over the strategic use of "foundational" claims. Because they see social categories by which subjectivities are defined as themselves potentially problematic, poststructuralists look upon the uninterrogated continuation of identity categories with suspicion. (*DSS*, 20)

Poststructural theory thus serves as a powerful mechanism by which to question sources of resistance to the introduction of sexuality and comprehensive sex education within schools. Moreover, by examining forms of subjectivity within the context of power, possibilities exist for greater elaboration of the complex relations between self and the community at large.

Mayo's poststructural rereading of the public deliberations surrounding the sex education and multicultural education programs introduced into New York's public school system during the late 1980s and early 1990s serves as a concrete example of the ways in which communitarian and liberal discourses respond to sexual controversy within the public sphere. In response to the AIDS epidemic, and the rising number of adolescents exposed to the disease, the New York State Board of Regents approved an AIDS education curriculum guide for sex education instructors within the state. The proposed integration of sexuality within public school curricula sparked massive debate and public outcry that Mayo contends was generated in large part by perceived "threats" associated with sex education discourse during the AIDS crisis. These perceived public threats came in three forms: (1) a confrontation with what then was largely perceived as a "gay" disease in AIDS; (2) threats to the sanctity of community due to an honest and open recognition of adolescent sexuality and the associated risks of premarital sex to the stability of marriage and family; and, finally, (3) a perceived threat to the dominance of heteronormativity, as adolescent homosexuality was brought to the fore of public discourse.

The debate over the New York public school sexuality curricula also highlights the strong ties between sexuality and citizenship and the importance various individuals and groups place on advancing their own definitions of

14. Amitai Etzioni, "Introduction," in *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 1.

“appropriate” social identities. One example cited by Mayo is the obvious failure by the State of New York Board of Regents’ Committee on Cultural Education to include LGBTQ representation as part of a larger task force charged with developing the AIDS education guide for sex education teachers. To ameliorate potential controversy surrounding the project, the Committee on Cultural Education chose instead to identify local religious leaders as external community representatives for the committee. This decision and others made by the New York Regents’ Committee indicates an overriding interest in maintaining sexual majority interests relative to the transmission of HIV/AIDS information to school children, as well as a clear unwillingness to recognize LGBTQ individuals as requiring a voice on issues of community well-being, safety, and public health. Mayo contends that transgressive acts such as those taken by the Regents’ Committee are reflective of a host of exclusionary tactics used by the New York school system and its local community supporters to eliminate LGBTQ interests from the public discourse surrounding sexuality in schools.

Although the introduction of sexual controversy within the public domain of schools had a polarizing effect on New York’s school system as well as on the community at large, Mayo is quick to point out that controversies such as these also provide democratizing possibilities for marginalized identities. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s deconstructive analysis of the “closet,”¹⁵ Mayo suggests that the mere invocation of homosexuality within the public sphere has the effect of destabilizing heterosexuality by making homosexuality visible. In this way, the binary of heterosexual and homosexual within public discourse “helps to explain not only the benefits of anti-homophobia education to those in the self-identified gay minority but also to show the inevitable links and overlaps between all sexual identities and groups” (DSS, 109). A clear example of “links and overlaps” is the rising number of Gay-Straight Alliances forming within schools throughout the country. It is within these institutional spaces, Mayo contends, that political identities can foment, offering potential for social change to occur.

Susan Birden shares Mayo’s view that collective struggle is key to forging more just schools, although Birden is much more inclined to advance a praxis-oriented theory. Indeed, laying the theoretical foundation for an educational praxis that undermines the heteronormative practices of liberal schooling is the basis for *Rethinking Sexual Identity in Education*. Birden’s focus upon the “cognitive dissonance” experienced by LGBTQ students in response to the structuring of heteronormative communities within schools closely parallels Dewey’s conceptualization of mis-educative practices — these refer to experiences that limit an individual’s potential for growth. The minoritizing effects of schooling on LGBTQ students are not only the consequence of dissonance experienced as a result of narrowly delineated sexual subjectivities, but they also result from the systematic

15. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

exclusion of LGBTQ students in such a way that they become outsiders to the school community.¹⁶ Outsider status is reaffirmed when teachers and administrators consciously or unconsciously omit sexually specific information that could encourage greater connectedness and inclusion within caring, supportive communities.

Birden's central argument focuses on collectivity as a means by which to fundamentally alter heteronormative practices within schools. She contends that LGBTQ school reform must coalesce around a form of activism that is pragmatically oriented yet premised upon theoretically sound principles. To illustrate this point, she introduces the "Out-Sider," a "pragmatic collective" of individuals actively committed to upsetting heterosexual dominance through educational praxis and "ethically responding to the exigencies of daily life for LGBTQ outsiders who have made the difficult and continuous decision to honor authenticity over safety" (*RSI*, 25). Modeled after the Outsiders' Society in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*,¹⁷ Birden's Out-Siders seek to eradicate the mis-educative effects of compulsory heterosexuality within schools through the formulation of an "Out-Sider Praxis" that aims to reconfigure the structural barriers limiting LGBTQ school participation and membership.

In order to create an educational praxis that authentically supports the work of Out-Siders, Birden maintains that theory must be pragmatically oriented. In other words, theory that supports praxis must have practical utility if it is to sustain the commitment to social change embraced by Out-Sider activists. It is on this basis that the "Praxes in re Sexual Identity" is conceived. According to Birden, the Praxes in re Sexual Identity is best understood as a set of principled actions that are derived and substantiated through a host of theories that have historically shaped how we conceptualize the subjective experiences of LGBTQ lives. Employing a rather elaborate dialectical process, Birden weaves together the most pragmatic elements of critical and feminist pedagogy, lesbian feminism, standpoint theory, poststructuralism, and social constructivism to develop a theoretical framework that is action-oriented and that has the potential to sustain the work of Out-Siders. Birden argues that the greatest challenge to the struggle against compulsory heterosexuality is the absence of a theoretically sound educational praxis. On the one hand, LGBTQ activism historically has operated within the logic of liberalism and the pursuit of individual equalities — arguably, a shortsighted pursuit. Conversely, academics have been firmly entrenched in social constructivist and poststructuralist work — theories and frameworks that Birden contends have been deployed unpragmatically. She argues that the theoretical struggle over how best to conceptualize the LGBTQ experience has directed attention away from the more important struggle against compulsory heterosexuality.

From Birden's perspective, LGBTQ Out-Siders must find a meaningful way to engage *collectively* in the struggle against liberalism. Liberalism operates not only

16. Birden's term "minoritizing" implies something similar to "marginalizing."

17. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

to quell differences in individual expression, primarily through the subterfuge of individual rights discourse, but it also seeks to eliminate the possibility for collective resistance by diffusing social struggle for the sake of social stability.

Likewise, challenges to LGBTQ Out-Sider activism may come from the Out-Siders themselves. Birden suggests that LGBTQ activism historically has been thwarted by a lack of cohesiveness due to differences in race, class, gender, and sexual identity, with the most heated disagreements grounded in the essentialist versus constructivist debates. Drawing on the work of political theorist Iris Marion Young, Birden uses Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "seriality" to identify an alternative form of social action. Seriality depicts a social collective "whose members," as Birden notes, "are unified loosely by the objects around which their actions are oriented" (*RSI*, 141). Seriality thus offers particular promise to LGBTQ Out-Siders in that it presents a viable solution for overcoming the historical divisiveness found within LGBTQ activist communities. Through the loose collectivity of seriality, Out-Siders can engage in forms of resistance against heteronormativity within schools despite preexisting tensions.

Situated within the Praxes in re Sexual Identity, Out-Sider collectivity is premised on common notions of social justice. Through practices of "out-sighting" (awareness of the need for moral responses to the daily manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality), "out-siding" (action framed within a community of friendship that grows from series collectivities), and "out-siting" (an awareness of the ways in which power is expressed through heteronormativity), LGBTQ activists work through collectivities designed to eliminate the heteronormativity of schools. In this manner, Birden's Praxes in re Sexual Identity offers a new framework for critiquing the liberal discourse of schools, revealing the embedded meanings found within the heteronormative curricula and social arrangements of the classroom, and offering opportunities by which to critique and make visible the power arrangements that sustain compulsory heterosexuality as a dominant paradigm within education.

For Birden, Out-Siders come in many different forms. As teachers, they seek to identify and eliminate curricula that portray heterosexuality as central to all social arrangements. As administrators, they confront homophobia exhibited in the hallways, classrooms, and playgrounds of their schools. As community members, they apply political pressure to local school boards to ensure a culturally diverse curriculum that includes the lived experiences of LGBTQ persons, insist that all schools enact antidiscrimination policies for sexual minority students, and ensure that schools become sources of support for LGBTQ students.

Although Birden borders on being overly abstract and a touch obtuse at times, her vision of schools is consistent with the perspectives on social justice offered by Vincent and Mayo. As a trio, these works clearly seek to lay inroads toward a more socially just system of schooling and an educational environment supportive of LGBTQ students.

RECONSTITUTING THE DEMOCRATIC SUBJECT

The three works discussed herein embrace the view that liberal forms of democratic practice, such as what we find in U.S. schools, have as their natural complement the demands of the society writ large. The connection between schools and society calls attention to the importance of citizenship and the role schools play in educating citizens. However, as schools have become firmly embedded within a rationale of efficiency, technique, and control, conceptual understanding of citizenship has been limited by a tradition in which schools simply serve to reproduce the status quo, preserving social, cultural, and economic privilege.¹⁸ Henry Giroux notes, for example, that

With the age of scientific management came the celebration of a new rationality and the removal of "the political" from the terrain of schooling.... Citizenship education became entwined in a "culture of positivism," one that displayed little interest in the ways in which schools acted as agents of social and cultural reproduction in a society marked by significant inequities in wealth, power, and privilege.¹⁹

Such a characterization of citizenship education adheres to a conventional Western model, as proposed by Thomas Humphrey Marshall, for example, in which citizenship is comprised of both formal membership within a state and a series of substantive rights, including civil, political, and social rights.²⁰ This conceptualization of citizenship rests on an implicit belief that there is an underlying universalism, whereby each individual citizen is granted rights and privileges in exchange for compliance with the state. Rousseau discussed this delicate exchange between the state and the individual citizen (typically understood as a *man* in Rousseau's time) as part of a larger social compact that serves to temper individual differences characteristic of humanity: "The fundamental compact...substitutes a moral and legitimate equality to whatever physical inequality nature may have been able to impose upon men, and that, however unequal in force or intelligence they may be, men all become equal by convention and by right."²¹

Fundamental to this conventional model of citizenship is an emphasis on the homogenous forms of equality and liberty espoused through compliance with the state. In effect, all citizens are looked upon as benefiting equally from membership within a particular society and are granted rights and privileges by the governing authority — the state. Moreover, membership rights and privileges are passively

18. See, for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991); Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985); and Peter McLaren, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures* (London: Routledge, 1986).

19. Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Toward a Pedagogy for the Opposition*, rev. ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 170.

20. Thomas Humphrey Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

21. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987), 153.

attained, as they are granted to the individual rather than actively sought through mandatory participation in civic life.²²

Although this conventional model of citizenship may render promises of individual rights and privileges to all members, it fails to do so equally. In contradiction to Tocqueville's celebration of the universality of American forms of citizenship some 160 years ago,²³ the quality and quantity of individual benefits enjoyed through citizenship is relative to the subjective positions of an individual's material, racial, gendered, or sexual circumstance. As Carlos Alberto Torres points out, "Theories of citizenship have been advanced, in the tradition of Western political theory, by white, heterosexual males who have identified a homogeneous citizenship through a process of systematic exclusion from, rather than inclusion in, the polity."²⁴ He goes on to explain, "Theories of democracy, while effective in identifying the sources of democratic power, participation, and representation in legitimate political democratic systems, [have] been unable to prevent the systematic exclusion of large segments of the citizenry."²⁵ Young echoes these sentiments in her discussion of the ways in which individuals and groups that deviate from existing standards of social membership are largely eliminated from the political milieu:

Modern political theorists and politicians proclaimed the impartiality and generality of the public [which may be understood as the civic/political sphere] and at the same time quite consciously found it fitting that some persons, namely women, nonwhites, and sometimes those without property, should be excluded from participation in that public.²⁶

Forms of exclusion serve to confer differential social benefits and, in essence, are explained by Taylor's politics of recognition: the idea that membership in a particular society entails much more than being granted basic rights and, further, that a fundamental aspect of human existence involves the recognition of one's identity.²⁷

Thus, according to social theorists such as Torres, Young, and Taylor, the liberal Western notion of formal democracy (that which is foundational and legally grounded) differs significantly from substantive democracy (that which is relative to particular contexts and realized through day-to-day lived experience). In effect, citizenship operates as an abstraction in which individual rights and privileges are not so much determined by the formal benefits of state membership, but rather by the material, social, and cultural conditions in which an individual may be

22. Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

23. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

24. Carlos Alberto Torres, *Democracy, Education, and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 4.

25. *Ibid.*, 4.

26. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 109.

27. Taylor, *Multiculturalism*.

situated. As a consequence, liberal democratic citizenship represents a system of exclusion in which powerful insider/outsider binaries mediate the benefits rendered through civic participation and state compliance.

Each of the three books presented in this review essay engages in a critique of the normative features of liberalism found within schooling (both explicitly and implicitly). Toward this end, these texts seek to highlight the discursive contradictions and structural conditions that operate to marginalize and disenfranchise LGBTQ students. Similarly, each book offers alternative forms of educational praxis that seek to disrupt the liberal status quo found within schools and thus to produce new forms of democratic organization and practice that conform with a more robust and inclusive notion of citizenship.

As reflected in works by Vincent, Mayo, and Birden, the current challenge to creating socially just environments within schools centers on fundamental problems with liberalism. Birden, for example, notes that liberal schooling produces “mis-educative” practices through the creation of universalizing environments in which a presumption of equality circumscribes and renders invisible the lived experiences of LGBTQ students. Liberalism perpetuates a form of exclusion that not only normalizes heterosexuality, but also eliminates the possibility for difference to be expressed. If a truly democratic project is to be advanced within schools, then educators must become, as Mayo states, “risk-resistant” — that is, educators, or “transformative intellectuals” in the tradition of critical pedagogy,²⁸ must recognize the dissonance (and pain) created through expressions of heteronormativity within school curricula, pedagogy, and policy making; challenge liberalism’s forced separation of the public and private domains; and confront the controversies arising from resistance and transformative action. As Vincent and various contributors to her volume argue, schools must engage in a form of social justice that is something much more than distributive in nature; rather, they must be multidimensional in their approach by acknowledging injustice rooted in identity and cultural differences. Although liberalism prioritizes distributional forms of justice, the sociocultural realities of a pluralistic democracy command a more sophisticated understanding of what social justice means within contemporary society. Toward this end, schools must combat the structural forces that impede the individual and collective agency of minority identities and engage in practices that encourage all students to deliberate critically over moral decisions and ethical dilemmas. Moreover, minority identities in particular must be free to contribute their voices to eliminating the oppressive contexts in which they are embedded. Developing institutional cultures that facilitate exposure to a greater range of identity options represents an important step in creating socially just schools.

A common thread running through these three books is the importance placed on building socially just school communities aimed at addressing LGBTQ marginality. Community, as understood through a multidimensional view of social

28. See Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Granby, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).

justice and the importance of institutional alliances and activism, provides a context in which insider/outsider binaries may be overcome. As each book argues, community cannot be construed as static and finite, but rather should be seen as dynamic, pragmatic, engaging, and participatory. Moreover, community should not be conceived as overly bounded, but as fluid and contingent. This relational form of community operates to disrupt a normative understanding produced through liberalism by seeking to challenge its exclusionary elements. Educational communities organized to combat discrimination against sexual minorities and to provide sufficient space for students to examine their own identities and desires encourage students to situate themselves as ethical actors within a democratic milieu. For LGBTQ students, this form of agency offers the capacity to reconstitute themselves as democratic subjects of their own making.

Each of these books serves to advance our theoretical and practical understanding of the relation between subjectivity and citizenship. The compelling arguments presented afford educators and scholars alike the opportunity to interrogate the discursive and structural limitations of liberalism and, by extension, the debilitating effects liberalism has for schools engaged in the democratic work of cultivating civic virtue and citizenship within diverse, increasingly multicultural societies. By actively transgressing the ideal of liberal schooling, identity differences have the potential to become honored features of a truly democratic project rather than merely a cause for educational controversy.

On a more critical note, the transformative vision advanced by Vincent, Mayo, and Birden seems strangely disconnected at times from mainstream politics, as if the political specter of the broader society has little influence in local politics and school decision making. Take the United States, for example. Is it conceivable that school boards would be wrestling with creationism versus evolution debates if not for the power and vitality of the conservative movement over the past twenty-five years or so? Similarly, it seems quite likely that progressive school boards have at times found, at best, minimal and half-hearted support for educational programs and policies supportive of LGBTQ subjectivities given that many political leaders seek to advance legislation denying LGBTQ persons full rights as citizens. Indeed, the power of this growing conservatism is poignantly evident in the Supreme Court's recent upholding of the 1996 Solomon Amendment, which gave the federal government the power to limit financial support to any college or university denying military recruiters access to prospective law school graduates. Politically progressive law schools had previously objected to a military presence on their campuses in light of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policies and the reality that such policies violate the nondiscrimination statements of many universities. As this case makes clear, in the push to appropriate educational institutions as extensions of conservative policy and ideology, there is an equally insidious push to further establish particular moral subjectivities consistent with conservative thought, thus potentially adding to the marginality of diverse sexual identities.

Although we certainly agree with the authors' critique of contemporary education, what do we make of the growing power of conservatism (in combination with

neoliberalism and neoconservatism) to impose limitations on liberal institutions such as public schools (as well as colleges and universities)? Oddly, the authors are for the most part silent about what Michael Apple describes as the “conservative restoration” that has been “the result of the successful struggle by the Right to form a broad-based alliance” aimed at reversing progressive and liberal reforms associated with previous decades of social struggle.²⁹ Apple goes on to note,

This new alliance has been so successful in part because it has been able to win the battle over common sense. That is, it has stitched together different social tendencies and commitments and has organized them under its own general leadership in issues dealing with social welfare, culture, the economy, and education.³⁰

What chance is there of progressively reforming “liberal” schools if we fail to recognize the power of the conservative movement to shape the nature of today’s cultural and political debates? When important political leaders such as Kenneth Baker, formerly the British secretary of education and science under Margaret Thatcher, boastfully claim that “The age of egalitarianism is over,”³¹ then there must be some recognition that “the times they are a-changin’” (an updated version of Bob Dylan’s classic line might read “the times they have a-changed” — and likely not for the better!) and that the changes are not necessarily supportive of a more progressive recasting of liberalism. Clearly, any attempt to forge more democratic educational, social, and cultural spaces in today’s environment must confront the political challenges of a regressive (and repressive) conservatism, especially in the United States.

Although much of what Vincent, Mayo, and Birden advocate places praxis at the center and recognizes the role and value of collective struggle in the effort to advance a fuller and more meaningful participation in schools and society by LGBTQ students and citizens, the battleground over realpolitik is at times forgotten or ignored. How can we hope to establish more progressive and transformative schools than those we already have without at least confronting the power of conservatives and neoconservatives to shape the public discourse and the social agenda?

Certainly, Mayo addresses this to some extent, although not as much as we would have preferred. But perhaps the authors see value in taking the offensive — by advancing a transformative social justice agenda — as opposed to adopting a reactionary position that addresses more fully the conservative onslaught. In this regard, their collective work is insightful and provocative and holds the potential to contribute in significant ways to advancing social justice in education.

29. Michael Apple, “Between Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism: Education and Conservatism in a Global Context,” in *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Nicholas C. Burbules and Carlos Alberto Torres (New York: Routledge, 2000), 59.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Apple attributes this quote from Kenneth Baker to an unpublished paper by Madeleine Arnot, titled “Schooling for Social Justice” (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England, 1990).