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Guoping Zhao
Oklahoma State University

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The Public and Its Problem: Dewey, Habermas, and Levinas

Guoping Zhao

Oklahoma State University

The question of who defines the *public* in public education in a democratic society is a tricky one. It is tricky because the answer appears deceptively obvious, but it is also deeply difficult. In a democratic society, the decisions about public education seem, by default, to be made by all people: concerned citizens, parents, or those who live within the borders of the district/state/nation, and who, presumably, share certain common values, interests, or purposes related to the future of the children and the place. Even though there are various diversities in a society, it is believed that there is sufficient common ground to bind people together. But reality is far less obvious. The common ground is often hard to find. People in different sectors often have significantly different, and sometimes oppositional, perspectives and interests, and therefore questions such as what should be included in the curriculum, what kind of knowledge is worth transmitting, what should be taught and untaught, and what hidden curriculum is meant to be delivered, even the fundamental questions of the purpose and goals of public education—what we desire to achieve in public education—are all heatedly contested. The outcome of the struggle, as shown in the banning of the Mexican-American curriculum in Arizona’s Tucson Unified School District, is often about what serves the best interests of the powerful groups or, at other times, what comes out of the negotiations and compromises of the dominant elite groups rather than the results of rational, inclusive, and critical discussions and debates among all interested parties. Similarly, the waves of educational reform in recent history, though claiming to target problems concerning the public, have rarely included the voices of teachers, educators, and parents in discussions with stakeholders and policy makers. The public has been only represented, and public opinions have only been reported, quoted, and surveyed. As McCarthy (1989) describes the public sphere in the social-welfare-state democracy, it is “a field of competition among conflicting interests, in which organizations representing diverse constituencies negotiate and compromise among themselves and with government officials, while excluding the public from their proceedings” (p. xii).

At a time when the country still holds dear the ideal of democracy, “the idea ...of rationalizing public authority under the institutionalized influence of informed discussion and reasoned agreement” (McCarthy, 1989, p. xii), the state of affairs is unfortunate and contrary to the very heart of our aspirations. But why has it become what it is? Why do democratic practices transmute and degenerate in a democratic society? Is the assumption terribly wrong that, without absolute state power and enforced norms or ideologies, the state of affairs will naturally lead to so-called neutral and equalitarian transactions, and even to democracy and social justice? And if so, why? Do we still need certain values or norms to guide and frame democracy? Or, as the theme of this issue asks, are we in the secularized world missing the theologian’s values and quests for stewardship? In education, if all actors are presumably free to participate and the playing field is neutral and objective, will the educational decisions necessarily be made in a democratic manner and serve the common good? If norms are indeed needed for the operation of public education, how can they claim legitimacy and on what ground?

These same questions have been the central concerns of John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas throughout their lifeworks. For example, in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Habermas (1989) traces the historical development of the public sphere in Europe in its early capitalist market economy, to study the rise and fall of the liberal public sphere and the reasons behind them. The so-called public sphere, in the forms and spaces of the media, parliaments, political clubs, public assemblies, France's salons, Britain's coffee houses, and Germany's *Tischgesellschaften*, is a realm where the bourgeois, private property owners, and individual human beings come together to mediate their private concerns and social demands and to discuss and debate matters of general interest in an open, rational, and critical manner. Against the power of absolute state authority, for the first time in history, individuals and groups had the opportunity to shape public opinion and influence political practices. However, according to Habermas, since the late 19th century, with the further development of a capitalist economy and consumerism, the public sphere gradually became debased. Powerful corporations came to use the media and advertising for control and management of public opinion and tastes, and state intervention increasingly played a more fundamental role in social, economic, and private lives. In the social-welfare-state democracy, the public sphere that was established for rational discussion, debate, and consensus, is transmuted and degenerates into a realm of mass cultural consumption, administration, manipulation, and domination.

What we often see in the decision-making process regarding matters concerning public education in the U. S. reflects Habermas's analysis of welfare-state capitalism—the powerful and the elite groups determine the direction and shape of public education for the public. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002), which currently pushes for accountability and standardized testing, represents more of the interests of powerful corporations and neoliberal ideology than reasoned agreement and informed consensus of the public. Therefore, there is never a lack of controversies and power struggles in the educational arena. But does the public sphere have to degenerate in its development in a democratic society? Is it possible to prevent and reverse such degeneration? Habermas suggests that the very same force that has given shape to the liberal public sphere has also destroyed it. The interest in expressing and mediating private concerns and social demands leads to an early search for common ground and societal consensus in the public sphere, but it also leads to later expansion and erosion of the boundaries between the private and the public, and state and society. Therefore, in searching for true democratization, Habermas turned to language and communication in his later work, to find more solid moral and normative ground for critiquing domination and oppression.

In this article, I carefully analyze Habermas's (1984) communicative action theory and proposed linguistic subject and argue that, contrary to Habermas' suggestion, language itself does not contain sufficient norms to ensure democratization. Drawing on Levinas's ethics and philosophy of the subject, I suggest that the survival of democracy requires a radically new concept of human subjectivity and different relationships among the subjects, which have to be cultivated in education. Since Dewey is the single most important philosopher in the United States who has thought deeply about issues of the public and democracy and has emphasized education's role in bringing the country together in the face of drastic differences, I first trace Dewey's political theory and analyze why it has fallen short of providing a viable approach to the problem of the public, and how Habermas's theory of communicative action has strengthened Dewey's political

theory by including intersubjective norms. While both Dewey and Habermas have emphasized that the problem of the liberal public sphere or democracy lies in the concept of the subject; and an ego- and consciousness-centered subject taken as the ground of the political system necessarily leads to a public sphere that is a battle ground, Levinas's radical theory of the subject that defies the egoist subject becomes significant. For the purpose of education for democracy, therefore, I urge educators to reconsider what type of human beings education should produce and to cultivate a different human relationship in schools.

Dewey's Individual as Organism and the Public

Throughout his life, one of Dewey's major concerns is how to build an American democracy that is based on a community of shared values and goals. According to Dewey, the appeal to the isolated self, or ego, as the foundation of the political system was at the root of the problems of the current public. A society where separate and pre-formed individuals seek their own interests, being prevented only from encroaching upon others, is fundamentally different from a community with shared purposes and ends. In "Christianity and Democracy," Dewey (1971) criticizes classical liberal individualism that envisions the individual as a separate entity in competition with others. But the tendency is so prevalent in Western culture, Dewey notes, that even the "philosophic theories of knowledge made the same appeal to the self, or ego, in the form of personal consciousness identified with mind itself" (Dewey, 1954/1927, p. 88).

Dewey (1969/1888) argues in "The Ethics of Democracy" that "men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to one another" (p. 231). Human beings are fundamentally relational. Dewey understands human relatedness from a naturalistic and functionalist perspective. The individual is an organism "consisting of a multitude of cells each living its own life" but always in association with others. "The activity of each cell is conditioned and directed by those with which it interacts, so the human being whom we fasten upon as individual *par excellence* is moved and regulated by his associations with others" (Dewey, 1954/1927, p. 188). Individuals are influenced by cultures and environments, but "what is generic and the same everywhere is at best the organic structure of man, his biological make-up" (1954/1927, p. 195). From this biological view of the self, Dewey (1920) argues in "Reconstruction in Philosophy" that society should be the environment and the means for creating individuals, rather than obtaining something from the pre-fixed individuals.

The difficulty with such a naturalist approach to the individual, however, is that it does not provide a normative ground for the "unity of purpose and interest" of all individuals in a public (Dewey (1987/1935), in "Liberalism and Social Action," p. 56). It does not explain how a society grounded in our biological make-up can escape the crude principle of survival of the fittest and the competition of the cells for resources. How can a society go beyond its biological basis in dealing with ideological and political conflicts and differences? The association of cells does not of itself necessarily make a society, as Dewey notes; there have to be some common norms or values that bind people together. But how do we reach such common norms?

Dewey's answer is through a joined inquiry of the members of the society. In joined activity, we perceive the consequences of our actions and such perception "creates a common interest" (1954/1927, p. 188) among all, and thus individuals contribute their part to realizing such a

common interest. Dewey believes that intellectual inquiry (cognitive and mental) alone can help the public reach a common agreement on shared goals and purposes, despite his criticism that we still appeal to the mind and consciousness for theories of knowledge. But it is unclear how a group of diverse peoples who do not share the same definition of a given situation can reach agreement just by cognitively and intellectually examining consequences. How, for example, can groups that are pro- and anti-Mexican-American curriculum in schools reach consensus by only looking at the possible consequences of including the curriculum, unless there has been agreement on what a *good consequence* means? But Dewey's democracy is conceived only in intellectual terms. "The problem of a democratically organized public is primarily and essentially an intellectual problem" (Dewey, 1954/1927, p. 126). For Dewey, there is no *a priori* norm. Democracy is experimental and is a social inquiry in which "criteria for what counts as a satisfactory solution may be hammered out in the process of searching for one" (Festenstein, 2009). Almost naively, Dewey (1987/1935) writes in "Liberalism and Social Action," that "the method of democracy – ... as that of organized intelligence – [can] bring ... conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately" (p. 56). Thus intelligence is the only means for reaching more inclusive interests against particular individual purposes.

Dewey's view that individuals are organisms located in their natural environment and his attempt to bring diverse people into a community often give people the impression that he is community oriented and undermines individuality. But at the same time, his concept of the individual does not defy the totalizing power of ego and consciousness, especially when he relies on the knowledge-acquiring mind and consciousness for his intellectual, cognitive approach to democracy and to the public. How can he escape the problems brought by the ego- and consciousness-centered subject? As Habermas makes clear, goal-directed and problem-solving inquiry has to be situated in an intersubjective and normative context that defines its parameters and its desired direction.

This limited concept of the individual is probably why Dewey's political theory has had limited impact on American democracy and in addressing the problems of the public. American democracy, far from Dewey's ideal as the "community life itself" (Dewey, 1954/1927, p. 148), still operates on the principle of "preventing rulers from advancing their own interests at the expense of the ruled" (p. 93). It is still the classical formulation of the "popular election of officials, short terms of office and frequent elections" (p. 93): The idea is that short terms and frequent elections ensure that the egoist rulers are held to regular account. Polling booths will provide their "day of judgment" and serve as a "constant check" on the rulers' actions (p. 93-4). Fundamentally, it is a system based on the ego- and consciousness-centered self whose "natural" drive is to fight to maximize its own self-interest. "The ballot is, as is often said, a substitute for bullets" (Dewey, 1954/1927, p. 207). In this situation, understandably, Dewey's call for public discussion, consultation, persuasion, and debate in democratic decision-making is often met with a deaf ear.

Habermas's Philosophy of Language and the Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas shares Dewey's view that the ego-centered and consciousness-based subject lies at the root of the problem of the public and democracy, even though he has virtually ignored Dewey in

developing his communicative action theory, perhaps because Dewey's functionalism and naturalism are very different from Habermas's social and symbolic approach. Disillusioned by the German philosophy of consciousness after World War II, Habermas turned to American pragmatism, avidly embraced the linguistic turn, and enacted a paradigm shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, in which human beings are no longer conceived of as primarily isolated, thinking beings but as essentially speaking and acting agents inter-subjectively locked in their social and symbolic actions.

According to Habermas (1992a), an ego- and consciousness-centered subject, the knowing subject that "view[s] itself as the dominating counterpart to the world" (p. 273) cannot escape the doom of objectifying the world, the others, and itself. If the only way we gain knowledge is through representing objects, in representing ourselves, the transcendental, spontaneous *I* who knows is inevitably turned into an object (Habermas, 1999). We lose our subjectivity, and we take away others' subjectivity, in an observer's attitude towards the world. According to Habermas, with the linguistic turn, this choice is no longer inevitable. From the perspective of speaking and acting agents engaged in communicative action, our relationship with others changes to that of participants and alter egos who can create a genuine public sphere where differences can be mediated.

Using evidence from ethology, particularly experiments with chimpanzees, Habermas (1992a) claims that what distinguishes us as a human species from all other animals is not consciousness, but "*communicative use* of propositionally differentiated language that is proper to our sociocultural form of life" (p. 274, emphasis in the original). In a speech act, human beings "enter into an interpersonal relationship, [which] is structured by the system of reciprocally interlocked perspectives among speakers, hearers, and non-participants who happen to be present at the time" (p. 273). This relationship of participants is fundamentally different from the relationship of subjects of consciousness, where the objectifying attitude is the only perspective the subject can adopt. This interpersonal relationship allows the subjects to be equal participants. Each has to enter into both the first-person and second-person perspective in order to communicate effectively.

In such a relationship, the other is not the object under my gaze, but is the alter ego that I have to recognize and engage with. The truth claims raised by the other cannot be treated "as something that appears in the objective world" and his utterance cannot be apprehended "as a mere fact," but has to be grasped as "symbolically embodied knowledge" (Habermas, 1984, p. 113). In Habermas's analysis, understanding meanings "differs from perceiving physical objects: it requires taking up an intersubjective relation with the subject who brought forth the expression" (1984, p. 11). The communicative experience indicates an "intersubjectivity that is established between ego and alter ego in communicative action" (1984, p. 111). Citing H. Skjervheim, Habermas emphasizes that in such communication, the other "is a follow-subject who concerns me as one on an equal footing with myself, in that we are both concerned with our common world" (1984, p. 113).

Our relationship to ourselves also changes in linguistically mediated communicative actions. Now we relate to ourselves "as a participant in an interaction from the perspective of alter" (Habermas, 1992a, p. 274). This relationship allows us to escape "the kind of objectification

inevitable from the reflexively applied perspective of the observer” (p. 274). In a speech act, “The first person, who turns back upon himself in a performative attitude from the angle of vision of the second person, can *recapitulate* the acts it just carried out” (p. 274, emphasis in the original). *Knowing thyself* thus becomes recapturing the meaning of what the self has said and done as a social participant from his/her partner’s perspective.

In addition, locating human agency in communicative actions also enables Habermas to expand the concept of rationality and to maintain its central role in human actions. A more comprehensive concept of communicative rationality recognizes that even the cognitive and instrumental actions of humans are carried out in the context of a shared lifeworld of all participants. In order to express and understand the purpose and validity of such strategic actions, the speaker and hearers have to refer to the same objective world, as the totality of an interpreted lifeworld. Thus the communicative concept of rationality must “examine the condition for communicatively achieved consensus” (Habermas, 1984, p. 13).

Habermas further proposes two distinctive measures of rationality in human communicative actions: normative rightness and subjective truthfulness. Habermas (1992a) argues, “As soon as we conceive of knowledge as communicatively mediated” (p. 276), rationality can also be assessed by raising and defending validity claims in establishing a common normative definition of a given situation, as well as by how the speaker discloses or conceals his subjective world to other participants.

The hearer can reject the utterance of a speaker *in toto* by either disputing the *truth* of the proposition asserted in it (or of the existential presuppositions of its propositional content), or the *rightness* of the speech act in view of the normative context of the utterance (or the legitimacy of the presupposed context itself), or the *truthfulness* of the intention expressed by the speaker (that is, the agreement of what is meant with what is stated). (Habermas, 1992a, p. 275, emphasis in the original)

Habermas’s broadened concept of rationality signifies his concern that the pursuit of our interests and goals requires a different form of inquiry, one that establishes a normative context for such pursuit. Precisely because different communities and peoples do not share a common definition of a given situation, public debate and deliberation must be carried out in an ethical and normative context. For Habermas, reason does not have to be blind and purely instrumental; it should be able to provide common goals and ends for human communities. “Communicative reason makes itself felt in the binding force of intersubjective understanding and reciprocal recognition” (Habermas, 1992a, p. 279).

Unlike Dewey, who conceives of democracy purely as a form of intellectual inquiry, Habermas intends for communicative action to be ethically permeated and normatively grounded. He emphasizes the rational, critical, inclusive, and non-coercive features of public debate and believes that if we communicate freely, openly, and rationally, we can reach common goals. Thus Habermas’s communication-based democracy is meant to be fundamentally different in its grounding than the liberal, public sphere developed in Europe. The driving force is no longer the private interests of the egoist bourgeois but the speaking actors interested in understanding.

Communication and language itself provide norms to promote democratization and to challenge domination and oppression.

Habermas's approach has had a significant impact worldwide, especially in countries where the control of minds and free speech is still a major part of political control. However, in the country which has a history of more than 200 years of a constitution, the country from which he draws most of his inspiration, Habermas is less enthusiastically embraced. In the U.S., he is perceived as too idealistic and utopian. While Americans have seen enough public debate, they also have seen much abusive use of such means in the political arena. Don't people often use public debate, not to reach consensus, but merely to strategically further their own interests? How can communicative action be the solution to the problem of the public?

The fundamental question to ask about Habermas, I would argue, is whether his paradigm shift is a viable one, whether a focus on language enables a genuinely intersubjective relationship that, as Habermas believes, defies the totalizing power of ego and consciousness. Does his theory of the subject based on language allow actual preservation of the subjectivity of both the self and the other? What is the role of ego/consciousness in a linguistically formed subjectivity, if consciousness is still an essential part of human existence? Does his expanded concept of rationality suffice to establish a public sphere where free, rational, and ethical deliberation can take place and differences can be jointly mediated?

In an earlier work, first published in 1967, Habermas (1988) claims that language is "the web to whose threads subjects cling and through which they develop into subjects in the first place" (p. 117). In describing how his subject comes to be, or becomes socialized, Habermas draws heavily on George Herbert Mead's notion of the social self. What draws Habermas to Mead is Mead's idea that the self is developed into personhood through a social-symbolic-interaction process, particularly through language use. "The idea that lets Mead break out of this circle of self-objectifying reflection requires the transition to the paradigm of symbolically mediated interaction," Habermas writes (1992b, p. 171). In these symbolically mediated interactions, "individuation is pictured not as the self-realization of an independently acting subject carried out in isolation and freedom but as a linguistically mediated process of socialization" (1992b, pp. 152-3).

Yet we may argue that for Mead 1962/1934, the social self is too fully immersed in socialization and eventually becomes a social product for whom creativity and originality cannot be explained. Mead says, "A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct" (p. 162). We owe our very personhood to society because as conscious and self-conscious beings, our self arises out of the process of symbolic interaction in which we take on what is expected of the *me* and become an *I* in responding to the diverse expectations. The rise of self means that the individual becomes the object of his own actions and can be viewed by himself as he views other objects. While adopting others' perspectives in viewing oneself may be different from the reflexive perspective of the observer, with the self conceived still in consciousness terms, it is difficult to see how this difference is substantial enough for a paradigm shift. Rather, being shaped in social interactions and through taking over the social institution, the self, one may argue, is even more objectified and loses its autonomy and originality. Habermas also admits that Mead's construction of the

self “exposes itself to the objection that it only applies to the reflected self-relation of a subject speaking with itself, but does not apply to *originary* self-consciousness” (Habermas, 1992b, p. 172, emphasis in the original), and that self agency only “functions in the consciousness of the socialized individual as society’s agent and drives everything that spontaneously deviates out of the individual’s consciousness” (p. 180).

The difference between Mead and Habermas seems to be that, for Mead, language is still a tool of the conscious self, a conscious being using language to interact with others and is shaped in the process of interaction; but for Habermas, language and communication replace consciousness as the origin of the subject, even though he never explains how, in communicative actions, the self becomes a linguistically formed subject. He does not specify the role of ego and consciousness in a linguistically formed subject. With such an underdeveloped theory of the subject, then, how can Habermas avoid the entanglement and implausible consequences of the ego- and consciousness-centered subject?

Habermas emphasizes that the unique feature of communication and understanding makes possible a different relationship between the ego and alter ego, one where they both remain participating subjects. Understanding, according to Habermas, entails that the self has to enter into the embodied knowledge of the alter ego and engage him on the same footing, as a knowledge-acquiring and truth-claim-raising subject. But I argue that communication and understanding by themselves do not necessarily lead to equal relationships between and among subjects. Humans have carried out communication and understanding throughout history, but communication has also been frequently used to reduce and objectify others. There is communication between masters and slaves, but the slaves have always been reduced, even when the master tries to understand what the slave is trying to say. The attempts at thematizing, figuring, and measuring what the other said, as well as the figuring and measuring of the other, can make understanding the very process of objectification. Language itself does not change the relationship between the self and the other; only the recognition of the inexhaustibility and originality of the *saying* and the *saying other* changes the relationship (Levinas, 1998).

In addition, Habermas’s project to surrender all knowledge and all meanings, including norms and values, under the power of rationality can still be problematic. The normative and ethical context Habermas strives to provide for goal-directed inquiry is established through another layer of cognitive inquiry. In describing how normative rationality can ensure an ethically permeated and normatively grounded deliberation, Habermas explains,

In one direction the question is whether the motives and actions of an agent are in accord with existing norms or deviate from these. In the other direction the question is whether the existing norms themselves embody values that, in a particular problem situation, give expression to generalizable interests of those affected and thus deserve the assent of those to whom they are addressed. (1984, p. 89)

It is difficult, however, to expect a group of diverse peoples to make the same judgment on whether the “norms ... can be justified, [or]... deserve to be recognized as legitimate” (Habermas 1984, p. 89). Like Dewey, Habermas believes that cognitive operation can guarantee consensus. His strong orientation toward cognitive validity makes his public deliberation theory

still an epistemic theory, and it has drawn criticism even from his most loyal supporters (Bohman, 1996; McCarthy, 1998). Norms and criteria, it seems, have to be provided, not cognitively determined. Reason, unfortunately, does seem to have its limits. Even for Kant (2012/1785), who uses reason to reach moral principles, the criterion of universality still has to be provided *a priori*.

With all these difficulties and problems, Habermas's theory of communicative action cannot stand alone in creating a public sphere where differences can be mediated. A Levinasian account of subjectivity seems necessary to complement and compensate for the weaknesses of his theory of communication.

Levinas's Theory of the Subject

Emmanuel Levinas has been perceived as a post-humanist whose philosophy is incompatible with the high-modern orientation of Habermas. Their concerns and purposes also seem to diverge in significant ways. But Levinas's philosophy of the subject is particularly developed against the totalizing power of ego and consciousness—perhaps that is precisely why he is perceived as a post-humanist thinker. But Levinas is no relativist or nihilist. His theory of the subject is worked out as an ethics. Thus Levinas might provide just the notion of the subject Habermas needs for a viable social and political theory of communication.

According to Levinas (1987), Western philosophy has been single-mindedly focused on ego and consciousness as the origin of human subjectivity. Such an orientation has led to the inevitable tendency to totality that does violence to the *other*, to the world, and to the subject itself. As he notes, "The 'I think,' thought in the first person," is the soul's "monologue," its "conversing with itself" (p. 49). When the ego attempts to thematize who the self is, and what the other is in the world, it locks the self in its own limitations and suppresses and possesses the other and the world. "The things will be ideas, and will be conquered, dominated, possessed" (p. 49). The subjective, egoistic, and self-centered tendency of human consciousness can only lead to a society of one against all.

Levinas attempts to reverse the orientation. He locates the origin of subjectivity instead in the pre-ego, pre-conscious, and pre-reflective experiences of human existence and in the encounter of the self with the Other and the world (Zhao, 2012). According to him, we live in the world, dwelling in happiness without knowing and coming to terms with ourselves, every moment before ego and consciousness *gather* us and our sense of the world. This is the state of unintentional interiority that cannot be captured by our knowing ego and consciousness, and therefore, we become radically singular to each other. Our encounter with the radical other, however, at the pre-ego and pre-consciousness stage, interrupts the all-encompassing power of ego and consciousness and prevents it from becoming dominant.

Levinas maintains that since the radical other cannot be known and assimilated into the total territory of the *I*, the power of ego and consciousness is undermined and instead, our sociality, the phenomenological basis for love, kindness, and holiness, becomes the origin of our subjectivity. Our uneasiness in front of the face of the other, for fear of having usurped the other's space and the unbearableness we feel when watching others suffer or die are rooted in our sociality. Before ego and consciousness isolate us, therefore, we are already called into

responsibility to the other. Responsibility is the primordial origin of human subjectivity. Ego and consciousness are secondary, coming only when *the third party* appears.

The already interrupted, unable-to-be, subject enters into the ego and consciousness stage when *the third* appears. According to Levinas, for the purpose of justice, we need to thematize, evaluate, compare, and judge. The power of ego and consciousness is justified only on the grounds of justice. Thus Levinas paints a subjectivity that appears and is manifest, but bears the trace of its own interruption and destruction in the face of the other. The *coming-into theme* while *getting-out-of phase* in the face of the other, the being that is always at risk of fragmentation, is the structure of our subjectivity. Being is the “dialectic” (Levinas, 1998, p. 3) of being and non-being. Thus, for Levinas, to be a subject is to be ethical and to be unconditionally responsible to the other. Ethics is not what we decide or learn, but what we are.

Because Levinas’s emphasis is on the non-being and subjection phase of the subject, on the primacy of responsibility, he never elaborated on what exactly happens when ego and consciousness finally arise with the third. How are thematization and presence carried out without falling back to the domain of the imperialist ego and consciousness? Without directly answering this question, however, Levinas pointed out that saying is the occasion when the other’s subjectivity, its inexhaustibility and originality, are demonstrated, and “absolute difference...is established only by language” (Levinas, 1969, p. 195). These ideas provide an opportunity to bridge Levinas’s subject to Habermas’s public sphere.

Introducing Levinas’ Subject to Habermas’ Public Sphere

The correlation of *saying* and *said* is often used by Levinas (1998) to “delineate the subject-object structure” (p. 46). He describes how the subject, the “otherwise than being,” eventually “flows into the temporalization of essence” and becomes thematized in the said, but always leaves a trace and is never “exhausted in [its]manifestation” (p. 46). To maintain the absolute separation (instead of integration and assimilation) between the self and the other, to preserve the alterity and subjectivity of the other, the only ways of expression and communication are through responsibility and discourse. “To present oneself by signifying is to speak” and “discourse is ... an original relation with exterior being” (Levinas, 1969, p. 66).

Indeed, in our daily lives, it is in speech and in expression that the other appears as a subject, unfathomable and inassimilable to our understanding. We inevitably see the saying other as more than what is said, more than what we can thematize and capture from the said, and the saying other retains his subjectivity, singularity, and otherness in our understanding. Among our activities and interactions with others, it seems, saying is the prime occasion when the hearer recognizes the originary, antecedent, and inexhaustible subjectivity of the speaker.

Therefore, Habermas is right: A speech act is where subjectivity is shown and recognized without truncation. But he is also wrong because such recognition is possible, not because of understanding, but precisely because of the impossibility of full understanding. Understanding cannot reach the *beyond being*. What we can know, understand, compare, analyze, and judge, is the objectified, the said, but the saying other remains intact. Thus the public sphere where a speech act is carried out can indeed be made into the space where subjectivity and otherness can

be maintained, and intersubjective human responsibility can be nurtured. It is also the space where Habermas's free, rational, and critical deliberation can take place. The unconditional responsibility of us to each other, the ultimate goal of justice, provides the ethical and normative parameters within which intellectual discourse and inquiry can take place. Ethics and norms are *a priori*, not to be determined by conscious and cognitive operation. They are unconditional and pre-historical. The said, the validity claims, on the other hand, can be criticized, analyzed, defended or rejected, not for the purpose of furthering one's self-interest and self-agenda, but for the purpose of justice and the common good.

In this public sphere, it is presupposed that each participant remains a singular and unique individual with alterity, not being fully grasped and assimilated. When Habermas (1992a) notes that "whoever has been trained in this system [of symbolic communication] has learned how, in the performative attitude, to take up and to transform into one another the perspectives of the first, second, and third persons" (p. 273), and when he suggests that it is the *alter ego* that takes up the position with regard to the ego itself, he has in mind a system of equal subjects able to completely know and understand the perspectives of the others. Critical discussion and communication are carried out based on the intersubjectivity understood as sharing perspectives. But the Levinasian concept of the subject entails a different relationship of singular participants who come with a degree of opacity, mystery, and radical difference. It is not a public sphere of the same, but of the unique and different. What binds us together is not the sameness or shared perspectives, but our unconditional responsibility to each other, for the sake of the call from the face of the other (the embodiment of his humanness): Levinas (1985) invokes Genesis when he writes, "Thou shalt not kill" (p.89); you shall not reduce me, comprehend me, or absorb me.

Reconsidering the Case of the Mexican-American Curriculum in Public School

A long philosophical journey indeed! But one that may eventually enable us to imagine a public sphere where decisions about public education can be made based on rational and critical discussion and debate by all in an ethical context, even if the public consists of singular individuals who have nothing in common. Rather than being an arena where different social and political groups strategically further their interests and the powerful and the elite determine the directions and shapes of public education, democracy is where individuals come together to reach reasoned agreement and informed consensus. It is possible because the subject, rather than being an egoist, self-interested, utility-maximizer, has been cultivated to respect the alterity and subjectivity of the other and to be responsible for the well-being of the other, and because rational discussion is for the purpose of the common good and justice.

Suppose that a group of Levinasian subjects, or subjects cultivated in Levinas's notion of the subject, are engaged in a public debate, and suppose they happened to be Caucasian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Mexican immigrants. What might happen?

The Caucasians will no longer be able to think and say: "*Those people* want to impose *their stuff* on our kids. *I know those people*. We have to stop *them*. No, not that *stuff* in my kids' curriculum." Rather, what they have to be thinking and raising validity claims about is the content, the claims and the said: How rich is the curriculum? Can it enrich students' learning and appreciation of world cultures and heritages? How is that going to affect their

sense of American history and cultural identity? They are not there to judge and measure *who* their counterparts are, but only to respect them as unique human beings who have made valid claims to be debated.

For the Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, perhaps, what they will not be able to think and claim is, “Now it’s *our* turn. *We* have to take over. We want *our kids* to be proud of *our* history and *our* heritage.” Instead, they should be thinking and asking questions similar to those of the Caucasians: the richness of the curriculum, the effect on students’ growth and on the nurturing of their minds, the issues of diversity and the continuity of American culture and history, the goal of justice to all in this land. These should be the concerns that are debated, and hopefully, consensus will be reached through rigorous, joined, examination. In the whole deliberation process, however, the primacy of love, kindness, and respect for the other as a unique human being is premised.

Clearly, Levinas’s subject, defying the totalizing power of ego and consciousness and responding to the radical otherness of the other, engenders a very different intersubjective relationship that has not been seen in modern and postmodern history. Such an intersubjective relationship makes possible the potential realization of Habermas’s public sphere where differences are rationally and communicatively mediated within an ethical and normative context. Democracy does not have to be about selfish individuals struggling to get a leg up on each other, nor about the powerful exploiting the powerless; it can be about genuine communication and cooperation. As educators, it seems, one of our primary goals is to bring into being ethical and rational subjects and to cultivate such intersubjective relationships in schools. That way, perhaps, the battle field of education will be replaced by true democratization.

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