

Teaching Progress? On the Role of History in Democratic Education

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Abstract

A central aim of democratic education is to enable students to develop a well-grounded and critical perspective on the sociopolitical struggles and conflicts of their times, on how these conflicts came about historically and also on potential future transformations that may evolve from the status quo. This contribution argues that in order to do justice to this forward- and backward-looking temporal dimension of democratic education, educators need to provide students with an epistemically non-distorted and normatively apt understanding of historical events and processes. This should involve the directive teaching of normative criteria that ought to underly judgements of moral-political progress and regression. In order to defend these claims, I will *first* introduce a democratic and liberal conception of moral-political progress that takes the educational dimension of teaching about and for progress into account and expound on how it differs from other classical as well as contemporary notions of progress. *Second*, I will develop a conception of democratic education as a historically situated normative learning process, that comprises two educational core features and aims. The first feature involves the acknowledgement of past wrongs and injustices and of structural continuities that connect the past with the present. Since mystifications, ideological instrumentalizations and other epistemic distortions of history tend to go along with continuing injustices in the present, we should help students to develop a critical and realistic understanding and consciousness of the way historical processes have shaped our world. As our moral reactions to historical events tend to convey how we want to live together in the present and the future, such forms of working through the past in many cases can itself be regarded as expressions of progress already achieved or as preconditions of future progress. The second, and closely related feature refers to the explication and justification of the normative criteria that should underly and guide our evaluation of past wrongs and of the sociopolitical struggles involved in trying to overcome them. A critical and progressive notion of teaching about and for progress in the context of democratic education should be based on instances of past moral-political progress and regression that can be regarded as noncontroversial and hence should be taught directly by educators. Not doing so would be incompatible with the very normative basis of every plausible and justifiable notion of democratic education and would amount to presenting students a distorted normative and (often also) flawed epistemic view on history (and in consequence also of the present and potential futures). *Third*, I will discuss some of the critiques and challenges this conception of teaching progress has to face. It has, among others, to engage with radically skeptical positions that assume that progress is a mere illusion, to deal with the fact that notions of progress have been instrumentalized as ideologies that justified colonialism and imperialism and with the critique that teaching progress results in forms of anachronistic presentism and status quo bias. My discussion of these critiques will show that the widespread skepticism concerning progress in public and academic debates is not just unwarranted and often based on normative self-misunderstandings, but also detrimental to realizing the aims of an historically informed democratic education.