
Response to the Presidential Address

CRITICAL POSITIONALITY AND LIBERAL NEUTRALITY:
NOT SO THICK AND NOT SO THIN

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Sheron's project here,¹ as I understand it, is to defend a "thin" conception of the public space such that it is robust enough to allow the expression and participation of thick subjective positions. It is not at all clear to me that this project solves the dilemma she begins with: the elimination of the messiness of substantive engagement by technology. Ideally, technology would enhance the public square and critical engagement. In our polarized political world, I think we may be heading away from this ideal. We engage by 40 character tweet that simply dismisses any legitimate concerns, usually by calling someone a socialist, or by simply clicking "block," "ignore," or "delete" so as to need pay attention only to that which with one agrees. The ideal is that technology might promote substantive engagement in the cyber-public-space by increasing the means of communication. Of course, technology has served this democratic imperative to some degree—think Arab spring. But, even then it was homogeneity of engagement to combat the power of the repressive state apparatus (RSA). The difference is that we are dealing, in our context, with the ideological state apparatus (ISA).² So combine block-ignore-delete with the claptrap that passes as news today—increasingly driven by the need to compete with multimedia—and I think, as Sheron, we have a real problem. As Neil Postman put it back in the 1980s,

This ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world—a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child's game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining.³

¹ Sheron Fraser-Burgess, "A Modest Proposal for Accommodating Pluralities of Desire, Imagination, and Human Flourishing in Education," this volume. Quotations appearing below are taken from an earlier version of the paper published here.

² I employ these as conceptualized by Louis Althusser. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

³ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985), 77.

The is ensemble of electronic techniques (e.g. tweets) disallows anything other than easy dismissal or simple-minded agreement. It is the problem of a chronic call for concision (read: sound bytes) despite 24/7 news networks. The entertainment aspect of our so-called news is similar to what Maxine Greene has referred to as “commodification.” In other words, the “news” today serves much the same purpose as, say, the NFL and other corporate entertainment: distraction. Having occupied our minds away from important issues of the day with the NFL, American Idol, Jersey Shores, ad nauseum, the corporate news media can simply then tell us what the important issues *are*, with the ultimate effects being, as Herman and Chomsky noted some time ago, a taming of the bewildered herd and the manufacture of consent.⁴ (This produces a very different meaning of “thick” subjectivity). But, since it is not at all clear to me what we do otherwise, let’s assume that Sheron is right, that a thinning of the public space will make it more robust such that critical engagement is enhanced. Does the fact that we are dealing with the ISA and not the RSA not still involve power? To what extent? Should we be required to deal with it in the public square? It is with this larger concern in mind that I respond to Sheron’s argument in which she pursues a Rawlsian sense of a neutral public space against what she posits as thicker conceptions provided by Greene and Dewey.

First, I don’t think Rawls is as thinly neutral or that Dewey and Greene are as axiologically thick as Sheron paints them. I think, in fact, that for the work Sheron would like neutrality to do for the public space, Greene and Dewey should be seen as providing conceptualizations that are complementary to as opposed to detracting from Rawls’s. Smuggled into this larger argument is the point that if Rawls is as thin as Sheron claims, I don’t think he should be. So let me address the two main topics of Sheron’s essay: subjectivity and then the nature of the public space in which one’s subjectivity is expressed or denied.

According to the argument, Maxine Greene promotes a thin conceptualization of subjectivity or, from another angle, a conception of public space that requires a thinning of one’s subjective position. The main complaints here are that Greene seeks to “blur or break group membership boundaries.” Similarly, against Dewey, the argument is that the full scope of Dewey’s vision was only tenable for the majority; minority groups could not bring their whole being, their subjectivity, to bear in evaluations of society.

As regards this first argument, certainly Greene was about blurring and even breaking boundaries generally, and perhaps even group membership boundaries. But that must be taken with a much more deep and simultaneous consideration of Greene’s complaints about our rootlessness. Here Greene

⁴ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). See also: *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 1992), DVD.

seems to agree with Arendt's emphasis on "those who come together being free to tell their own stories, to speak from their own locations in the world."⁵ This is because we must be able to "articulate what [we] have to say against the background of [our] own biographies," which is what puts us "in a position to listen to others—and be listened to."⁶ So, one could interpret this as blurring or breaking group membership or one could interpret this as not only seeking connection with and recognizing the roots of our subjectivity (the source of which is necessarily one's relations with others usually through some sort of group membership), but also critical engagement with that subjectivity. I think the latter interpretation is more accurate of Greene and a healthier take on critical positionality.

Here Greene and Dewey are not dissimilar. To my mind, they both recognize and promote both the thick conceptualization of subjectivity and Sheron's stated purpose of critical positionality. Both Greene and Dewey require us to recognize and wrestle with the sedimented meanings of our past, meanings that have taken shape in relation to others or, as Dewey might put it, within our local associations. The problem for Greene and Dewey is, as Greene puts it, much of the time we are not conscious of our standpoint, we are, instead, immersed in our daily life, and I would add, the meanings and common sense understandings that our daily life constructs for us. This is what Dewey refers to as habit. Socially acquired habits, including habits of thought, shape the subject for Dewey and in so doing, "project themselves": "Habit incorporates, enacts or overrides objects, but it doesn't know them."⁷ Greene addresses this immersion through engagement with the aesthetic. Dewey addresses it through the democratic method, which requires reflection upon "hitches"—"incompatible factors within the empirical situation."⁸ This is why the public space cannot and is not a closed moral system for Dewey: democracy requires engagement with the other to invoke such hitches. Such engagement must also become "habit" in this sense and take into account the social and material context in which habit is practiced and reinscribed,

⁵ Maxine Greene, "Public Education and the Public Space," *Educational Researcher* 11, no. 6 (1982): 7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 177.

⁸ John Dewey, "Introduction to *Essays in Experimental Logic*," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10, 1899-1924 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 326. See also Raf Vanderstraeten and Gert Biesta, "Constructivism, Educational Research, and John Dewey" (paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, MA, August 1998), <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Amer/AmerVand.htm>; and John E. Petrovic and Jerry Rosiek, "Disrupting the Heteronormative Subjectivities of Christian Pre-Service Teachers: A Deweyan Prolegomenon," *Journal of Equity and Excellence in Education* 36, no. 2 (2003): 161-169.

including the public space, such that democratic habits or, perhaps, habitudes, are formed. (Notice that the context can also be virtual and reinscribe non-democratic habits). These readings of Greene and Dewey are not only consistent with but seem to be definitive of critical positionality, the purpose of which, as Sheron puts it, is to “problematize one’s stance from which meaning is made.”

The second argument is that Greene and Dewey narrow the public space to a homogeneity of points of view. Greene insists on dialogue, the nonpromotion of sexism or racism (and presumably many other isms), and the rejection of one-dimensional certainty. This, Sheron argues, is a far too thick set of axiological commitments. Similarly, since African Americans were not “allowed to call on structural racism as a vantage point,” Dewey’s theorization of democracy became a “closed moral system.”

In response to this argument, it is not at all clear to me that the set of axiological commitments named is too thick, nor, by implication, the criteria of belief, desire, and intent. A belief and participation in dialogue, for example, seems an absolutely necessary component of the liberal democracy Sheron seeks to sustain. This, to my mind, requires no further argument. A desire for a non-racist, non-sexist community may be too thick, but only, I would presume, to sexists and racists. Of course, it is more complicated than that. Nevertheless, on this point, the argument suffers for the same reason that Aaron Schutz critiques Hannah Arendt:

Because we can never entirely escape the marks of our identities or the effects our social positioning has on us, Arendt’s avoidance of issues of power and her belief that local political spaces could be created in which such normalized differences could be transcended becomes extremely problematic.⁹

But, then, I am confused by Sheron’s recognition that “subjectivity is relationally constituted by one’s identity positions in society and their related conceptions of human flourishing,” which seems at least a tacit recognition of power. If this is the case, then this raises another point of confusion for me in that Dewey’s work with the NAACP was a recognition of the power of racism that existed in society at the time. So, on the one hand, Dewey seems to be cast as accepting or maybe even promoting an exclusionary moral system and, on the other hand, precluded in this framework from addressing that very concern—a concern that Dewey clearly had. In the end, I find it difficult to think non-racism (it’s not clear that we’re talking about anything stronger, such as anti-racism) is a characteristic that promotes a “thick value determination of the public space,” or, at least not one that should be precluded from being

⁹ Aaron Schutz, “Creating Local ‘Public Spaces’ in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (1999): 83.

valued. In Dewey's case, I think it was a recognition of a social reality, a racist social reality that would have betrayed even Rawls's thin notion of neutrality.

Finally, an intention of finding common ground without insisting on one dimensional certainty, seems to me to be precisely the point of neutrality—i.e., a thin conception of public space. Such intention is problematically thick for evangelical Christians who certainly hold a one-dimensional certainty. This may be a case where for Greene and perhaps for Dewey that the public space should or does thicken. However, I think the question that nags here is why we should let evangelical Christians off the democratic hook of critical democracy and why does Sheron let them off the hook of critical positionality? Furthermore, in this particular case, not even Rawls would let them in the public square given his criterion of *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine for Rawls squares the public political values, a complete political conception of justice, with and through the lens of the private comprehensive doctrine. Comprehensive doctrines that do not, say, accept freedom of religion (either for political reasons or reason internal to the comprehensive doctrine that upholds the political reasons), would be, for Rawls, unreasonable. In this vein, they would be unreasonable for not abiding by a norm of reciprocity. And reasonableness and reciprocity seem to be prerequisites for Rawls for the kind of dialogue that Sheron defends in which citizens share “their critical positions around a given issue with the goal of achieving coherent positions for social cooperation.” For Rawls, reciprocity precludes imposition of truth as dictated by comprehensive doctrines that fail to recognize the legitimacy of public values. Thus, for Rawls, public reason and, thereby, “reasonable,” can be summarized as:

Citizens engaged in *certain political activities* have a *duty of civility* to be able to justify their decisions on *fundamental political issues* by reference only to *public values and public standards*.¹⁰

Another way of thinking about reciprocity is, as Brighouse (2006) explains it, “when we engage in politics [here I might say when we engage in the public square] using public reasoning [as required by Rawls], we should not make claims and arguments that cannot be accepted by others unless they already hold fundamental moral commitments about which we expect reasonable people to disagree.”¹¹ (Since Sheron relies on him a great deal, I should point out that this is precisely why Andrew Payne rejects thick conceptualizations of the public space). By this standard, for example, it is not permissible for the evangelical to argue that homosexuality is an abomination (and subsequently defend political measures based on the argument) for that claim is made only

¹⁰ Leif Wenar, “John Rawls,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/rawls>.

¹¹ Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 67.

from the authority of divine revelation (more specifically one interpretation of divine revelation). One of the problems with absolute truth is that it seeks to end discussion in order to complete society, not to question our truths to renew society, in other words, not to engage in democracy. Thus, it is the case that evangelical Christians *might* also be excluded from Rawls's public space.

To wrap up my comments, I would like to make some short observations about the three phases of deliberation for it is here that Greene and Dewey are particularly helpful to this project. I have pointed out that both Dewey and Greene promote the first, "self-reflexive" phase, Dewey by bringing people into contact such that their habits might be challenged which results in "knowing" an object differently (even if one's basic position might not change) and Greene by engagement with the aesthetic that indeed reveals us as cultural beings creating. The second phase, identifying relevant attributes of the social context, would seem to suggest that indeed racism and sexism (and heterosexism) must be addressed in the political space and, while racists and sexists should not be precluded from participation, surely the norm of reciprocity must apply to them. The achievement of reflective equilibrium in the third phase is inherent to Dewey's democratic method for once confronted with a hitch, reasonable people seek to make sense of it such that it fits within or changes their worldview. This seems parallel to Rawls's larger project of recognizing *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines.

So, maybe Rawls is not so thin and Dewey and Greene are not so thick after all.
