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TRAVELS WITH (UN)CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

I studied government in college and then taught it and other social studies subjects at a Colorado high school in the 1970s. Currently, I am conducting design-based research on the high school government course while also studying civic education more broadly—the current discourse on “educating global citizens,” for example. I mainly use interpretive methods, which require close attention to meaning. When a kindergartner says about a new rule, “That’s not fair!”, I want to know what she means by fairness and from whence her conviction stems. When a high-school senior says of his government course, “I don’t want to learn about this because I don’t plan to be a politician,” I am struck by his vocational stance toward knowledge and wonder what it means for his citizen identity. There appears to be a pattern here: government, citizenship, and orbiting systems of meaning. It may have begun with the sewing group.

THE SEWING GROUP

My lower-middle-class parents were members of the United Methodist Church; therefore, so were my sister and I. Such is the “thrownness” of life. As Sartre (1957) wrote, we are dropped into existence without a predetermined character, and then begin to construct ourselves in interaction with what we find when we start sizing up our environments and making choices about how to act. None of us chooses the social contexts of our birth or the strong discourses that come with them: gender, class, race, religion, customs. And we have already been steeped in them by the time we become aware of them.

A United Methodist upbringing, at least in Englewood, Colorado, on Denver’s south side, was loaded with liberal tolerance of other faiths. This was quite the opposite of fundamentalism, but still, my parents worried about suburban insularity and homogeneity. Caught up in the Roosevelt-era social-democratic liberalism that was still alive in Eisenhower’s post-war America (decades before its demise at the hands of Thatcher and Reagan), they set about assembling a group of families who attended other Christian churches. They wanted my sister and me to be exposed to a wider array of beliefs. These other churches—Mormon, Baptist, and Catholic—were to my sister and me strangely different. Not scary, but odd.

Soon, our parents reached farther, for there were non-Christians too: other monotheists (a Jewish couple) plus polytheists (a Hindu couple) and nontheists (a Buddhist couple). As the initial exoticism of this experiment in grassroots multiculturalism subsided, the group became ordinary friends. Our mothers were the primary glue: they gathered monthly at one another’s homes to talk and sew (they referred to themselves as “the sewing group”). But the couples gathered now and then, too, and always celebrated New Year’s Eve together. The children became friends, populating one another’s birthday parties and gathering at the annual sewing-group picnic on Labor Day, steeling one another for the looming school year.

It was a thoroughly modern thing my parents did, for it assumed that their faith was but one of many. “Modern faith becomes reflexive,” Habermas wrote (2006, p. 152), “for it can only stabilize itself through self-critical awareness of the status it assumes within a universe of discourse restricted by secular knowledge and shared with other religions.” Modern society is characteristically self aware in this way, thus affording the possibility of pluralism and the existential recognition that we live in a “plural world” (Wacker, 1989).

This modern reflexivity has important political consequences, not the least of which is the idea of the neutral, secular state. Reduce religion’s role in government and you mitigate at least one particularly virulent cause of domestic oppression and state-sanctioned warfare of the kind that has plagued humanity for so much of its history. But there is a second political consequence: the spread of constitutional democracy. These are not merely *electoral* democracies in which citizens, via elections, authorize elected officials to make law and administer society; they are also *liberal* democracies in which religious and other differences are accepted as a fact of plural life, and their free exercise is protected by law. That’s the ideal, at least, and the basis for civil rights movements that struggle to realize it on the ground. Voting, then, is not the only form of popular political participation in a society that is trying to be a liberal democracy and not the most demanding. There are other citizens with other viewpoints—ideological and cultural—and relating to them, tolerating and even respecting them, is part and parcel to creating and maintaining the democratic project.

By this route, we arrive at a decentralized and discursive image of democratic life. On this model, democracy’s location is not relegated to the political system or what is colloquially called “the government” or to persons who become “politicians”; rather, it pervades society. Here is Dewey’s famous conception of democracy as a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1985, p. 93). Note Dewey’s emphasis both on living together *and* talking to one another: government by discussion. Citizens’ rights and liberties are secured not only by the government but perhaps more so by the efforts of fellow citizens. Citizens, therefore, not only have rights and liberties, they have obligations: to relate democratically to fellow citizens, to communicate with them, exchanging viewpoints and reasons, and to take responsibility for nurturing this mode of associated living.

Powerful social forces compete with this communicative model of liberal democracy, draining the associational highways and byways of the public sphere of their potential for democratic education and mobilization. These include religious fundamentalism and other forms of monism, certainly, but also free-market fundamentalism (neoliberalism), which prevents serious attention to eliminating poverty. Each of these undercuts a citizen’s political maturation, or what I’ve described as growth from “idiocy” to “citizenship.”

IDIOCY/CITIZENSHIP AND OTHER OPPOSITIONS

I was encouraged by colleagues and editors to abandon use of the term “idiocy,” replacing it with “individualism.” So I moved it from the planned cover of my 2003 book, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*, to the inside where it became the title of Chapter 1: “From Idiocy to Citizenship.” A few years later, I used it in the title of an article in the *Kappan*: “Teaching Against Idiocy” (2005). To this day I appreciate its rhetorical force and the discussion it inevitably provokes.

Idiocy in its origin is not what it means today: stupid or mentally deficient. The recent

meaning is deservedly and entirely out of usage by educators, and no doubt it is the recent meaning that gave pause to my friends when I was about to use it on the cover of a book. Still, the original meaning can be resuscitated as a conceptual tool for clarifying the central goal of social studies education, which is *citizenship* or, again using a more arresting term, *puberty*. The ancient Greeks coined these terms. Idiocy shares with idiom and idiosyncratic the root *idios*, which means private, particular, self-centered, selfish. “Idiotic” in the Greek context was a term of reproach. When a person’s behavior became idiotic—concerned myopically with private things and unmindful of common things—then that person was believed to be like a rudderless ship, without consequence except for the danger it posed to others. This is why Pericles could celebrate Athenian democracy by saying, “We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.”

Idiocy achieves its force when contrasted with *politēs* (citizen) or *puberty* (public-mindedness). Accordingly, we have a powerful opposition: the private individual and the public citizen. An idiot is one whose self-centeredness undermines his or her citizen identity, causing it to wither or never to take root in the first place. Idiots do not take part in public life. They do not *have* a public life. In this sense, idiots are immature in the most fundamental way. Their lives are out of balance, disoriented, untethered, and unrealized. An idiot is self-defeating, for the idiot does not understand that privacy and autonomy are dependent on the community. As Aristotle wrote, “individuals are so many parts all equally depending on the whole which alone can bring self-sufficiency.” Tragically, idiots have not met the challenge of *puberty*, which is the transition to public consciousness: being both a private and public person, and understanding the connection and, therefore, taking one’s place on the public stage.

I appreciate Tocqueville’s (1969) perspective on this opposition, too. All democratic peoples face a “dangerous passage” in their history, he wrote, when they “are carried away and lose all self-restraint at the sight of the new possessions they are about to obtain.” (p. 540). Tocqueville’s principal concern was that getting “carried away” causes citizens to lose the very freedom they desire. “These people think they are following the principle of self-interest, but the idea they entertain of that principle is a very crude one; and the more they look after what they call their own business, they neglect their chief business, which is to remain their own masters.” Just how do people remain their own masters? As Aristotle said, by maintaining the kind of community that secures their liberty. Tocqueville’s contribution to our understanding of idiocy and citizenship is the notion that idiots are idiotic precisely because they are indifferent to the conditions and contexts of their own freedom. They fail to grasp the dialectic of liberty and community, mistaking them for opposites when they are, in fact, intertwined. I agree with Chafe (2012) that each pole of this opposition is a major American narrative: that in fact there is no singular American story, whether a nation of immigrants, the struggle for civil rights, or the American Dream, but a tense, dual narrative featuring two plotlines, individualism and community.

I believe we are snared by oppositions like this one, seduced by their dichotomous logic. We succumb, and then take our place at one pole or the other and issue polemics at the other side. Looking for a way out, I have been experimenting with a deconstructive tool called the “semiotic square” (Hébert, 2012). The purpose of drawing a semiotic square is to explore an opposition. The protocol is, first, to step back, taking in the periphery, and then re-engage it with the advantage of that enlarged view. The square helps observers to see that the opposition has a conceptual network that extends beyond the given binary. The dichotomy is only a starting point. Second, the square falsifies the binary and leaves in its place a tension. This distinction is important. Opposites negate one another; they cannot occupy the same space. Meanwhile, poles in a tension can and do co-

exist, although not easily—hence “tension.” They take meaning from one another; their meanings are related, but how? That becomes the question.

Let’s return to the opposition Individualism/Community, which is closely related to Idiot/Citizen. Using the square (see Figure 1), we find that this opposition has at least four initial possibilities: Individualism, Community, and their true opposites: Not Individualism (the negation or contradiction of Individualism) and Not Community (the negation or contradiction of Community). Not Individualism is a constellation of meanings that includes more than only Community. Community is just one possibility in the category Not Individualism; slavery, childhood, and totalitarianism, for example, also fall into the category. Similarly, Not Community is a set of meanings that includes more than just Individualism. Individualism is only one possibility in the category Not Community; independence, family, and loneliness, for example, also fall into this category. And there are at least two more logical possibilities, both hybrids: Individualism *and* Community, and *neither* Individualism *nor* Community.

If this sort of analysis strikes the reader as semantic, it is. But it is not “merely semantic” because it also is pragmatic: language gets things done. Discourse simultaneously shapes the phenomena it purports to describe. The purpose of peering more deeply into an opposition and its orbiting system of meaning is to make visible the array of meanings that stem from the simple binary. As we do this, the binary is destabilized and opened up; we might say that it is “ventilated.” The aim is to avoid getting stuck in the initial, closed opposition, and then accepting the dichotomy and shutting down the possibilities at two as if these were the only alternatives and your fate was to take a side. In a bull session this might work; but as a research strategy or a general method of intelligence, it is feckless.

Looking again at Individualism/Community, let’s extend the analysis as before to four, and then, with hybrids, to six meanings and this time to eight. We will see that the last two hybrids (positions 7 and 8) reinforce and strengthen one term in the opposition as a consequence of negating its contrary. “Idiocy” can be seen as one such strong position on the square: position 7.

PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Examining the square in Figure 1, note first that the principal terms in the given binary are found inside the square on the upper horizontal (positions 1 and 2). Their contradictions or negations are diagonally located on the lower horizontal. This completes the first four positions: the two terms and their true opposites. Second, note the hybrids. These are represented outside the square on the four sides and are formed by adding the nearby terms inside the square. This takes us to eight possible meanings.

5. At the top of the Individualism/Community square, we have the hybrid Individualism *and* Individualism. This was formed by adding the terms inside the square on the upper horizontal. If one can imagine or find empirically this combination, in society or policy statements, then this demonstrates that a contrary or tension is not to be confused with a contradiction or negation. Both the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are statements of position 5. *Puberty*, in the Greek meaning, marks the achievement of this hybrid in a person’s maturation.
6. At the bottom we have the opposing hybrid, Neither Individualism nor Community, which was formed by adding the terms on the lower horizontal. This is a broad field

of possibility that excludes only these two categories. I cannot think of an example without leaving the human realm (e.g., rock, water). Can you?

7. To the left, we add the verticals on that side of the square and arrive at Individualism plus Not Community—a strong laissez-faire individualism with no hint of community: *idiocy*.
8. To the right, we add the verticals on that side of the square and arrive at Community plus Not Individualism; in other words, strong collectivism. This is not easy to find in the U.S.—not since the Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and *The Scarlet Letter*. Despite American conservatives' fears, leftist communitarianism in the form of socialism never caught on in the U.S. (Lipset & Marks, 2000).

I have used semiotic strategies to explore a number of tensions that I find in democratic citizenship education in the United States. I will list these tensions along with references to the writing in which I examined them.

- **Idiocy/Citizenship** and **Individualism/Community**, as we have just seen. (Parker 1996a, 2003, 2005, 2014).
- The so-called “international education” movement in U.S. public schools. Central tensions here are **Nationalism/Cosmopolitanism** and **Multicultural Education/Global Education**. (Mitchell & Parker, 2008; Parker 2008a, 2010a, 2011a; Parker & Camicia, 2009).
- **Transmission/Transformation**. Should the social studies curriculum transmit the status quo (socialization) or transform it (counter-socialization)? This is an old debate in our field, venerated but hackneyed. Fresh analyses, like Stanley's (2010) are needed. (Parker, 1996b, 2010b, 2012)
- **Knowing/Doing (Enlightenment/Engagement)**. There has been another longstanding debate over whether democratic citizens need mainly to know things or mainly to do things, and (similarly) whether educating them should focus on book learning or experiential learning. A hybrid (position 5) is needed: democratic citizens need both to *know* democratic things and to *do* democratic things. A proper democratic education proceeds in both directions in tandem, aiming for enlightened political engagement. (Parker, 2001, 2008b)
- **Seminar/Deliberation**. Corresponding to the knowing/doing tension are two forms of classroom discussion. Seminars get little done in the world; rather, they aim to *reveal* the world. Deliberations are all about getting things done: deciding *which* action to take. (Parker 2006, 2008b, 2010c; Parker & Hess, 2001)
- **Depth/Breadth**. Advanced high school coursework around the world is strapped to a dysfunctional conception of rigor that features a long list of topics “covered” at a fast pace: “accelerated learning.” But this runs counter to contemporary research on how people learn and what learning is. (Parker et al., 2011, 2013)
- **Agency/Structure**. Do individuals and groups, such as professors and teachers, have the power to make social and political change or are they determined by social structures, such as capitalism and patriarchy? Even Marx rejected the binary and took position 5: “Men make history but not in circumstances of their own making.” (Parker, 2011b).

DECONSTRUCTION, HILDA TABA, AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

The sewing group had both political and existential consequences. Due to this exposure to traditions other than the United Methodists, my father converted to Catholicism, eventually becoming a deacon, and we became a two-religion household. My sister and I loved it. We had pancake breakfasts with coffee in the church basement on Sundays and spaghetti dinners with wine at the parish on Fridays. Not many years after, I joined the one non-theistic tradition in the group: Buddhism. Steering clear of god-creator concepts altogether, it simply focuses on delusion and enlightenment, suffering and relief.

The precipitating event was this. While I was teaching high school in Denver in the 1970s, I heard that a leading Tibetan meditation master had moved to nearby Boulder. This was Chögyam Trungpa. I began attending his talks, where I encountered the likes of Alan Ginsberg and Anne Waldman who were helping him establish the poetry department at the Naropa Institute. I was drawn to Trungpa's humor, scholarship, and command of English. He was of the "crazy wisdom" tradition of yogis and appealingly unconventional. Mindfulness and awareness were the core curriculum. These are radically empirical practices, emphasizing bare attention. I learned to distinguish between simple observation (bare attention) and thinking (analysis, evaluation), which fed my budding interest in empirical research. Observation is alert, awake, and inquisitive; thinking is conceptual, interpretive, and often judgmental. Both are good. They are not opposites. While they overlap, they are distinct, too: position 5.

Buddhist principles intersect my scholarship in a few ways, mainly in terms of deconstructive strategies like the semiotic square. In Buddhist teachings as in post-structuralism, constructs are not solid, but temporary assemblages that appear permanent. They are conditioned and contingent. The tensions listed above are good examples, but the contemporary discourse that "Our Schools Are Broken" is perhaps the best example of the current era. It is a strong discourse, what Geertz (1983) called a "common sense" or what Galbraith (1958) named "conventional wisdom": a construct that overwhelms competing discourses. At present, one cannot say, and at the same time make sense to anyone, that schools are *not* broken. It would be like speaking voodoo rather than medicine in a hospital. Eyes would roll.

Concepts—pedestrian ones like table and pencil, and extraordinary ones like truth, justice, and gender—also are contingent assemblages that appear solid. Concepts are constructs used to organize our experience and create a predictable experience. Also, like any construct, they inscribe the power relations of the day. (Think of the concepts *marriage* and *planet*: legislation is pending in several states that would solidify a particular definition of marriage, and Pluto was recently voted out of the concept planet by astronomers at their annual meeting.)

With this introduction to concepts out of the way, I can introduce another major influence early in my career—Hilda Taba, the curricularist. With Taba, concept development entered my life like a lion. Her effect on me was both epistemological and pedagogical: She changed the way I thought and the way I taught. Rarely again would I mistake a concept for its label—"table" for an elevated platform with one or more legs—a mistake Taba called "the rattle of empty wagons" (Parker & Perez, 1987).

I never met Taba. She died in 1967 before I encountered her work in the 1970s when I was in my twenties and a new social studies teacher in Colorado. The school district had an ambitious program of professional development for teachers. It was both costly for the district and challenging intellectually and professionally for us teachers. My colleagues and I were young, unmarried, and idealistic, and in it (teaching) for the long haul. Together, we devoured the

program. As part of it, two of Taba's former associates, Lyle and Sydelle Ehrenberg, were invited to present a series of workshops based on Taba's work on concept development. The Ehrenbergs had developed a professional development program called "BASICS": Building and Applying Students' Intellectual Competencies. The goal was to improve students' learning of the curriculum by helping them think deeply about it, and then to carry the same thinking strategies into other domains. I participated in the first workshop during summer vacation, where I learned Taba's inductive method of concept development. Taba believed that the school curriculum should revolve around concepts, that learners develop concepts gradually, building and remodeling them recursively, and that major concepts need to be spiraled through the grades: introducing them early on, and then revisiting and refining them as the child matures. "Thought matures through a progressive and active organization and reorganization of conceptual structures" (Taba & Elzey, 1996, p. 132).

I found this a powerful way to address curriculum, teaching, and learning at the same time. It tackled the depth/breadth tension head-on, offering a particular resolution, and made a major contribution to the "higher-order thinking skills" movement of the 1980s.

The Ehrenbergs were brilliant, competent, and kind (a terrific combination), and they were the sort of passionate, quirky intellectuals to whom I've always gravitated. I went to work for them for several years, traveling with them during summers to conduct workshops in St. Louis, Youngstown, and elsewhere. Back in Colorado, I left the classroom for the first time to become a full-time "BASICS trainer" for the school district. I worked with small groups of teachers, K-12, on concept development. I could see that this work encouraged teachers, quite organically, to revamp their courses. I say "organically" because when they began to teach concepts more deliberately, using Taba's approaches, they realized that all along they had been trying to teach too many concepts—"covering" more than anyone could possibly grasp, and treating concepts (ideas) as mere vocabulary. And so, they began culling the courses, selecting and prioritizing concepts. U.S. History teachers might choose just three concepts, which they spiraled through the eras across nine months. And primary teachers selected just one or two concepts and went into great detail with a multitude of examples: "Families Near and Far" and "Communities: Now and Then." Best of all were the arguments among teachers of the same course or grade over which concepts deserved this much attention.

MENTORS: THE A TEAM

I have already mentioned three of my mentors: Trungpa, Taba, and the Ehrenbergs. I must now introduce four more: two more during my formative years, the 1970s, and one each from the 1960s and 1980s.

While teaching in Colorado, I began taking graduate courses in the social foundations of education. Although I had gone to CU-Boulder as an undergraduate, I attended CU-Denver for my masters degree. There I met two remarkable professors, both serious intellectuals who launched me into studying the philosophy and sociology of education. Marie Wirsing taught the philosophy courses and centered much of her teaching on the Holocaust, which I then knew only in broad outline. She featured it as a turning point in modernity but also as a logical extension of centuries of Christian anti-semitism. Thanks to Wirsing, I read Hannah Arendt and also Plato's education plan and struggled with where to place them in the Individualism/Community tension.

Wirsing introduced me to a sociologist of religion named Sally Geis. Professor Geis became the second reader of my masters thesis and took an interest in my family's sewing group experiment, prodding me to view it through sociological theory (Weber, Durkheim). She also led me into the sociology of teaching via Willard Waller and Burton Clark, and the economics of schooling via Bowles and Gintis. I became curious about a structural dilemma in liberal democracies: the tension between the mass ideology of equal opportunity for vertical mobility—"college for all" and the "American dream"—and the limited number of slots in the upper reaches of organizational hierarchies. While the belief in equal opportunity encourages individual aspirations to make it to the top, numerical realities make upward mobility an impossibility for everyone. Such a society has the dual challenge of motivating achievement through effort while simultaneously denying access to many. Aspiration/Denial is another opposition in which schools play a central role.

In the 1980s, I was teaching at the University of Texas at Arlington, just 30 minutes from Dallas's jazz and Ft. Worth's cowboy two-step. This was my first professor position. In 1984, I managed to get away to Harvard for a brief post-doc with Lawrence Kohlberg, the moral psychologist. While reading his opus, I also read Martin Luther King, Jr. Both of them explored justice deeply, not simply rattling off the term like one of Taba's "empty wagons." Crucially, both believed that intellectual and moral development proceed on intertwined, not separate, tracks—position 5 again. Both scholars have played key roles in my thinking. Chapter 4 of *Teaching Democracy* (2003) brings them together in "Cutting Through Conventional Wisdom."

Earlier, in the 1960s while at CU-Boulder, I met Buckminster Fuller, the inventor and architect. I was dazzled, as we all were, by Bucky's day-long lecture each year at the World Affairs Conference held on campus, and once I had lunch with him and his wife, Anne. He set my mind off on orbits that I hadn't known existed. An iconoclast like Arendt, he cut through conventional wisdoms of all sorts. Most important for me were the ideas that Earth was analogous to a spaceship and that humanity was, indeed, producing enough food to feed the entire crew. World hunger is not caused by a food shortage? That was a revelation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We who work in education do so in extraordinary times. The university as we have known it for centuries is dying as governments de-fund it. Now, we go for money not to the public but to donors and foundations (gifts and grants) on the one hand and to students themselves (tuition and fees) on the other. Scholars have routinely done this—to an extent—but not to this extent. As always, we serve our masters, but they increasingly are private masters. Steadily, they are shaping both faculty hiring and, thereby, the college curriculum. In this way, they are refashioning the disciplines themselves, including education. Society is becoming subordinate to free enterprise and wealthy individuals; the nation-state is yielding to the market-state. "We the people" (public citizens) are morphing into "we the entrepreneurs" (private individuals) who strategically advantage ourselves on the new "flat" playing field. Schooling itself has been commodified, as Labaree (2010) demonstrates so well. Idiocy is ascendant, and citizenship educators will have to use all the agency at their disposal just to keep alive the idea of the "public": a political culture beyond the private silos of individuals, families, religions, and neighborhoods. This will require no small amount of practical intelligence sharp enough to cut through the strange, new conventional wisdoms that are materializing before our eyes. Here is Community in tension with Individualism like we have not seen before.

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Figure 1. A semiotic square on Individualism/Community

