

Home > Ben-Porath, Sigal. 2006. *Citizenship Under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Carolyn Chernoff

In her book *Citizenship Under Fire*, University of Pennsylvania researcher Sigal Ben-Porath interrogates the notion of democratic education during times of conflict and the “belligerent citizenship” she argues that conflicts at the national level create. While Ben-Porath owes an acknowledged debt to philosopher (and University of Pennsylvania president) Amy Gutmann’s work on deliberative democracy, Ben-Porath also seems to draw on the notion of democracy as a system of organized uncertainty (Przeworski, 1991). Within those two notions of how democracy best functions, Ben-Porath explores the relationship between citizenship, national identity, education, and what is and is not permitted during times of conflict. Ideas about citizenship change during times of war, and Ben-Porath seeks to understand how this happens—and what educators can do to prevent harmful changes. In critiquing the tendency of democratic governments in the United States and Israel to use the terrors of war as justification for a severe limitation of options available to citizens, Ben-Porath calls for what she calls “expansive education.”

In arguing for her own theory of expansive education, Ben-Porath examines how theories of peace education, feminist education, and multicultural education address the challenges of wartime. In theory and practice, she argues, none of these theories provide satisfactory tools for education during times of war. Yet it is not only education during times of war that Ben-Porath critiques; she moves beyond the current tendency to see peace and multicultural education as an absence of war or conflict. In her analysis of three theories of education, Ben-Porath demonstrates the limitations of such education for students and for society. It is her vision of expansive education that offers one realization of deliberative democracy during uncertain times, whether war, peace, or otherwise. While proposing a normative direction for education, Ben-Porath consistently interrogates modern visions of war, peace, and citizenship within contradictory systems of democracy.

The democracy Ben-Porath examines in this book is one that both operates under an assumption of openness, discussion, and rationality even as it severely limits all of these things. These limitations are not only on the level of public discourse, but as Ben-Porath points out, manufactured and replicated in schools. The aspects of Przeworski’s democracy as organized uncertainty that Ben-Porath seems to echo ironically become a national rationale for curtailing the deliberative aspects of democracy that Ben-Porath, among others, see as the lifeblood of this system.

The notions of “democracy” governments tend to invoke during times of war call to mind Iris Marion Young’s critique of community (1990). Following Young, valuing unity over difference and agreement over dissent silences the deliberation Ben-Porath, Gutmann, and others see as crucial to a healthy democracy. During times of war, this notion of democracy that seeks to limit the rights and privileges of citizens for what is assumed to be their own good has particularly disastrous effects on students in schools. In her examples from the United States and Israel, the job of public education in democracies is that of creating citizens. In a particularly chilling vignette, she recounts a question on a civics exam given to Israeli high school diploma seekers in 2002, who were asked to explain why conscientious objection to military service is a subversive act. This episode illustrates one of the main conflation Ben-Porath seeks to pry apart: the linking of education with furthering the military interests of particular modern democracies, and the ways in which particular notions of democracy demand belligerent and unquestioning citizenship.

Ultimately it is Ben-Porath’s critique of education during times of “war” and “peace,” as well as the way that she teases apart the seeming binary association of the two, which makes this a thoughtful contribution to literature on civic education as well as the relationship between education and society. As she argues in this book, democratic or expansive education is a “subversive act” in an age of belligerent citizenship. Ben-Porath’s vision of expansive education is also an act of hope, providing new visions for and of the future.

References

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