

# Educating the Elite: A Social Justice Education for the Privileged Class

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Article abstract

America is witnessing a new gilded age. Since the 1970's, inequality in wealth and income has soared within the United States—and globally (Sayer, 2016; Therborn, 2013). Such inequalities affect human flourishing because they allow the privileged class to convert their wealth into different, and unequal, lifestyles and life chances. In addition, such inequalities provide the privileged class with greater opportunity to convert their wealth, income, and social capital into influence within the political system that undermines democracy. Considering the vast class-based inequities, then, how can social justice educators help the students born into the world of class privilege understand their civic obligations to deepen democracy—particularly economic democracy? And, how can they do so without engaging in morally reprehensible teaching practices? This paper takes a 'critical approach' in attempting answer this question. First by analyzing the cultural and structural causes of behind the world of class privilege—what I term the pathology of privilege. As well as, explaining how the pathology of privileges undermines democracy. Then I analyze four possible social justice approaches for the class privilege—class suicide; political apathy; civic volunteerism; and activist ally. I concluded by explaining why the activist ally approach is both a more crucial and morally appropriate approach for educating the elite about their responsibility to deepen democracy and advance justice.

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# *Educating the Elite: A Social Justice Education for the Privileged Class*

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*Abstract: America is witnessing a new gilded age. Since the 1970s, inequality in wealth and income has soared within the United States—and globally (Piketty, 2014; Sayer, 2016; Therborn, 2013). Such inequalities affect human flourishing because they allow the privileged class to convert their wealth into different, and unequal, lifestyles and life chances. In addition, such inequalities provide the privileged class with greater opportunity to convert their wealth, income, and social capital into influence within the political system that undermines democracy. Considering the vast class-based inequities, then, how can social justice educators help the students born into the world of class privilege understand their civic obligations to deepen democracy—particularly economic democracy? And how can they do so without engaging in morally reprehensible teaching practices? This paper takes a “critical approach” in attempting to answer this question, first by analyzing the cultural and structural causes behind the world of class privilege—what I term the pathology of privilege. Second, I explain how the pathology of privilege undermines democracy. Then I investigate four possible social justice approaches for the class privileged—class suicide, political apathy, civic volunteerism, and activist ally. I conclude by explaining why the activist ally approach is both a more critical and morally appropriate approach for educating the elite about their responsibility to deepen democracy and advance justice.*

## **Introduction**

America is witnessing a new gilded age. Since the 1970s, inequality in wealth and income has soared. During the 1970s the top 1 percent of Americans earned 9 percent of the total income, and the top 10 percent earned 33 percent of the total income. By 2008, the top 1 percent earned 21 percent of the total income and the top 10 percent earned 48 percent of the total income. Inequalities in wealth are even more staggering. In 2007, the top 1 percent of Americans owned 34.6 percent of the country’s wealth, and the next 19 percent owned 55.5 percent. In total, the top 20 percent of Americans own 85 percent of the country’s wealth, leaving 15 percent of America’s wealth to be distributed amongst the bottom 80 percent (Bartels, 2010). On top of the inequalities in income and wealth, the United States has a relatively low social mobility rate. According to the PEW Charitable Trust (2013), 70 percent of those raised on the bottom of the wealth ladder will remain on the bottom two rungs, while 66 percent of those raised on the top rungs of the wealth ladder remain there. Thomas Piketty’s (2014) massive study on inequality also confirms these numbers. As he explains, “by 2010, the top decile’s share of total wealth exceeded 70 percent, and the top centile’s share was close to 35 percent” (p. 349).

Inequalities in income and wealth affect human flourishing because they allow the privileged class to convert their wealth into different lifestyles and life chances (Chetty et al., 2016). Affluent families tend to live in highly segregated communities, which means their children attend hyper-segregated suburban, charter, and/or private schools, where they have little exposure to students from other racial groups, political ideologies, or economic backgrounds (Bishop, 2009; Massey, 2008). In addition, the privileged class has a far greater ability to convert their wealth, income, and social capital into influence within the political system. On almost every possible measure (e.g., donating to campaigns, voting, protesting, and participating in civic organizations), the affluent are more likely to participate within politics and influence the political process (see Levinson, 2012, pp. 23–60; Schlozman, Verba, Brady., 2012). Inequalities in the ability to flourish and participate politically create a world where individuals within the upper 20 to 25 percent of the income bracket live separately from others, and thus see the world remarkably differently from the least advantaged (Bishop, 2009; Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014). And the world of the privileged class is not for adults alone; children, through no fault of their own, are born into privilege, and will more than likely be socialized into a privileged worldview.

This circle of reproduction brings me to my questions: *How can social justice educators help the students born into the world of class privilege understand their civic obligations to deepen democracy—particularly economic democracy? And how can they do so without engaging in morally reprehensible teaching practices?* I am concerned with the issue of morally reprehensible teaching practices because often social educators are accused of indoctrinating students, being biased towards a “leftist perspective,” or unethically disclosing their opinion. Thus, a normative framework for helping social justice educators teach about class privilege also requires ensuring the framework is both reasonable (i.e., morally justifiable) and radical (i.e., actually capable of helping children challenge class privilege). To answer these questions this paper shall be organized as follows: Section I explains how class domination creates an ideological worldview—which I term the pathology of class privilege—wherein privileged individuals are less likely to understand the systematic nature of their class privilege. Section II develops a critical theory of justice, based upon Jürgen Habermas (1998; 2005) and Rainer Forst’s (2011) normative idea that justice and democracy are coextensive ideas, and that justice is about ensuring all social practices affecting an individual’s life meet the standards of public justifications. Section III explains the educational issues that must be addressed when providing students with a social justice education. Section IV critiques three different approaches to teaching social justice: class suicide, political apathy, civic volunteerism. Finally, Section V brings our discussion together by explaining why the activist ally approach is both a more critical and morally appropriate approach for educating the elite about their responsibility to deepen democracy and advance justice.

Before proceeding, I need to clarify the scope of this paper. My discussion focuses *only* on class privilege and class domination, not the intersections between class and other dimensions of oppression.<sup>1</sup> Also, I am only concerned with a social justice education for privileged students. I focus on the privileged class because it’s often assumed the least advantaged have the primary responsibility to advance justice (Swalwell, 2013). I think this assumption is wrong. The privileged class also bears a responsibility to advance justice, and a social justice education should teach students about such responsibilities. However, to understand what such an education would entail we must understand the world of the privileged class.

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<sup>1</sup> For stylistic purposes, I will use “the privileged” interchangeably with “class privilege” and “the least advantaged” to refer to those without class privilege.

## Section I: The World of the Privileged Class

The privileged class lives in a different world. The upper one-fourth of the income bracket—the 27 percent of Americans whose annual income is 75,000 dollars or more—are most likely to live in communities with those who have the same class status and ideological worldview. In addition, they are most likely to send their children to a four-year university, to be politically active, and to use their privilege to garner unequal political influence (Bishop, 2009). But what makes the privileged class a “class”? And how does their class status affect their worldview and democratic sensibilities? As Wright and Rogers (2010) explain, “class” is a way to describe “the connection between individual attributes and material life conditions: class identifies those economically useful attributes of people that shape their opportunities and choices in a market economy and thus their material conditions in life” (p. 196). The upper class, then, consists of those individuals whose social position (e.g., wealth, income, social connections and talents) provides them with opportunities to live their life either at a distance from others or with the capabilities to distance themselves when they choose (Sayer, 2005).

Class also identifies a person’s opportunity structures, which consist of a combination of the personal and structural advantages an individual receives that increase their well-being and opportunities across the civic, political, economic, and private spheres (Bourdieu, 1984). Analytically speaking, class has two intersecting components: one *structural* and one *cultural*. The structural component of class is made up of the institutional factors (e.g., laws, institutional and economic arrangements, economic insensitivity, income, and wealth) that shape opportunities available to individuals. For example, the increase in the inequalities in wealth and income over the last thirty years are partly due to the weakening of labor unions, the dismantling of the social welfare programs, and skewed tax and economic policies that benefited the upper class (Bartels, 2010). These structural factors create a cultural context in which privileged individuals, and their children, develop certain habits, skills, dispositions and perspectives about the world. Individuals within the upper class, for instance, tend to have a higher sense of entitlement than those in other classes; they are more likely to feel comfortable challenging authority and being in elite settings such as business, colleges, governmental offices; and they tend to have more exposure to elite forms of culture through visiting museums, traveling to foreign countries, *etcetera* (Lareau, 2003).

The combination of structural and cultural factors creates a world of class privilege and class domination, in which the structure of the economy and the distribution of wealth are not publicly justified. Inequalities in wealth and income provide privileged individuals with an *unequal* and *unjustifiable* access to wealth and income, which are converted into unequal opportunities to live a flourishing life. As explained above, the privileged class tends to live in safer communities, attend elite public and/or private schools, have access to better health care, and acquire jobs that expand their cognitive skills (Bishop, 2009; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Lindsey, 2013). This concentration of wealth constitutes a form of *opportunity hoarding* because the privileged use their unequal access to resources, goods, and social institutions to ensure they have greater access to positions and social networks that reproduce their class status. The world of the privileged class is also reproduced through *class exclusion*. In addition, the privileged class is more likely to use its capital (e.g., cultural, economic, and social) to unjustifiably influence the democratic process in ways that secure or

better their family's class position. As a result, the least advantaged face a civic oligarchy wherein the wealthy use their arbitrary power (political and economic) to ensure said power is reproduced (Winters, 2011).

Within this context of class domination, the privileged class also develops an ideological world-picture: a perspective of the world that assists in stabilizing and legitimating the social and institutional practices that reproduce their class privilege (Sherman, 2007). I shall call this ideological worldview *the pathology of privilege*. The pathology of privilege consists of the larger social structures and micro practices that systematically advantage a distinct group of individuals. Like other social pathologies, the pathology of privilege is a "second-order disorder," which means individuals tend to systematically and reflexively internalize the identity that justifies their privileged position (Zurn, 2011). As an ideology (in the pejorative sense), the pathology of privilege creates a form of consciousness that helps support, stabilize, and legitimate certain social institutions and practices that reproduce class domination. For instance, as research illustrates, those within the privileged class are more likely to see their privilege as either legitimately earned or detached from structural problems, and thus are more likely to internalize particular beliefs, habits, and values that contribute to the reproduction of their privileged class (Howard, 2007). In addition, members of the privileged class are less likely to recognize how the suffering of others relates to their own class privilege (see Khan, 2010).

In sum, the pathology of privilege systematically incentivizes the formation and performance of a privileged identity wherein affluent individuals receive a cluster of advantages, due to their class position, which are corrosive to democracy. Such privileges and class inequalities are corrosive because they fail to meet the standard of public justification. By this I mean that the structure of the economy and the distribution of wealth are not democratically determined, and the unequal distribution of wealth affords the privileged class greater opportunities to influence policies and institutional arrangements in a manner that reproduces, or betters, their class status. In addition, the pathology of privilege corrodes the democratic sensibilities of privileged individuals by creating an ideological worldview that negatively affects the credibility they give to the least advantaged (Sayer, 2005). This means the privileged class improperly recognizes or refuses to take seriously the class demands put forward by the least advantaged (see Allen, 2007; Bohman, 2000; Fricker, 2009). However, to normatively understand why the wealth and power the privileged class has acquired is unjustified, we need to define justice.

## Section II: Critical Theory of Justice

A critical theory of justice is grounded within the radical democratic tradition and starts from the premise that *justice is about justification*: Justice is about ensuring *all* social practices and power relations affecting an individual's life are reasonably *justified* to the individual affected, and democracy is the process through which these justifications are established. Justice as justification is "critical" because it allows us to identify domination, injustice, and oppression by tracing the power relations that fail to meet the standards of *justification*, and thus are not democratically legitimated. Building upon Habermas (1984, 1987), Rainer Forst (2011) argues "the demand for justice is an emancipatory demand. ... [I]ts basis is the claim to be respected as an agent of justification, that is, in one's dignity as a being who can ask for and give justifications" (p. 2). This emancipatory demand aims to ensure all social relationships affecting an individual are democratically determined, and the capacity to take part in dialogues and

justify one's positions to oneself and others is what constitutes the normative core of a critical theory of justice (Pereira, 2013).

A critical theory of justice conceives of justice and democracy as coextensive ideas in two respects. First, justice and democracy require ensuring individuals can collectively determine how to govern their lives and that norms, laws, and social institutions are reasonably sharable to all those affected, and thus meet the democratic standard of public justification (Shapiro, 1999). Public justification is established when two normative standards are met: *reciprocity* and *generality* (Forst, 2011). *Reciprocity* means that no one may refuse the particular demands of others that one raises for oneself (reciprocity of content), and that no one may simply assume that others have the same values and interests as oneself or make recourse to "higher truths" that are not shared (reciprocity of reasons). *Generality* means that reasons for generally valid basic norms must be sharable by all those affected (Forst, 2011). Simply put: public justification, and thus justice, is established when all individuals can participate within the intersubjective process of public deliberation (*reciprocity*) to ensure all social practices and power relations affecting an individual life are reasonably sharable (*generality*).

The second way justice and democracy are coextensive is they both require establishing relations of *non-domination*. As Forst explains (2008), "justice is first and foremost about ending domination and unjustifiable arbitrary rule, whether political or social in a broad sense" (p. 315). Domination exists when individuals are subjected to the arbitrary rule of power, which occurs when the principles of *generality* and *reciprocity* are systematically undermined. Since our focus is on class, it is important to define economic domination. *Economic domination* occurs when the means and distribution of production fail to meet the standards of democratic justice; in other words, when the structure of the economy and the distribution of wealth are not publicly justified. Here we are concerned with two ways economic domination occurs: *class exclusion* and *opportunity hoarding*. *Opportunity hoarding* is the unjustifiable way in which wealth and income are concentrated into the hands of a small group of individuals and then converted into unequal and unjustifiable opportunities. As Charles Tilly (1999) explains, laws, social practices, and economic arrangements allow property to be concentrated into the hands of small groups and then passed on to subsequent generations; this concentration of property and passing down of wealth contributes to their unequal and unjustified distribution. *Class exclusion*, on the other hand, occurs when social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms prevent or limit a particular class from participating on par with others (on both the formal and informal levels of the public sphere) in the democratic decision-making process, specifically in the process of democratizing the economy (Fung, 2006; Habermas, 1998; Wright, 2010). As Tom Malleon (2014) explains, for example, "widespread inequality in the possession of skills and ownership of productive assets leads to unequal bargaining positions which in turn lead to inegalitarian contracts" (p. 35). And thus, class exclusion occurs in this example because the widespread inequalities in skills and ownership prevent lower and working classes from equally participating within the democratic process of determining a "fair contract" (Przeworski, 1986).

Lessening economic domination requires extending democracy into the political economy, which is often termed *economic democracy*. Economic democracy is based upon the normative principle that the structure of the political economy must also meet the standards of public justification: individuals must have greater democratic control over the economy and the means and distribution of production must be reasonably determined by the people. As Tom Malleon (2014) explains, "a genuinely democratic society cannot quarantine democracy in its political structures; democracy must spread beyond formal

political structure into the economy itself, since it is the economy that is the root of much social inequality” (p. xii). For our purpose, democracy can be deepened into the political economy along two lines. The first line focuses on reorganizing work to ensure the workplace, financial and investment institutions, and other wealth generating institutions are more democratic. Examples of deepening democracy along these lines includes cooperative businesses, social housing, and public and cooperative banks (Malleon, 2014; Wolff, 2012). The second line focuses on a more equitable distribution of wealth and democratic control over how wealth is used. For example, the basic income grant movement and the participatory economy both aim to ensure wealth is distributed more equitably and individuals can democratically debate over the use of wealth.

Before proceeding, let me briefly distinguish a critical approach to justice from an analytical (post-Rawlsian) approach to justice. While my discussion here cannot cover the depth of the differences between these traditions (Forst, 2002; Hedrick, 2010; O’Mahony, 2013), hopefully it clarifies what is unique about the “critical” approach I am taking to educating for social justice. Generally speaking, the analytical tradition interprets justice, democracy, and autonomy as distinct values—sometimes at odds with each other. And in doing so, it relies upon two key arguments that are challenged by critical theorists. First, it tends to interpret democracy as instrumentally valuable—that is, valuable insofar as it advances some other values like justice, human flourishing, well-informed preferences, *etcetera* (Estlund, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Rawls, 1971). Second, the analytical approach often conflates justice with distributive justice. Based upon these two assumptions, the analytical approach tends to discuss educating for social justice as educating children to understand how their choices may negatively impact the opportunities of others—especially the least advantaged—while weighing an education for social justice (read: distribute justice) against other conflicting values such as personal autonomy, democracy, or human flourishing (Brighouse, 1998; Schouten, 2012).

The critical approach, on the other hand, conceives of justice, democracy, and autonomy as coextensive and mutually reinforcing concepts. Consequently, this approach interprets democracy as intrinsically valuable: the value of democracy is based upon the fact that it aims to respect individuals as free and equal persons capable of publicly deliberating with each other and collectively determining how to structure their mutually shared social world (Honneth, 2013; Meckstroth, 2015; Rostbøll, 2015). The critical approach, then, challenges the conflation of justice with distributive justice. This conflation, as Iris Marion Young (2011a) explains, leaves several questions unanswered: Who determines what goods are produced and how they are produced? Who determines how the opportunity structure is organized? And who determines what goods are distributed and how they are distributed? (Forst, 2007; Laden, 2013) And for a critical perspective, these questions must be addressed through democratic decision-making processes. In this sense, a critical approach to social justice education focuses on teaching children about their democratic rights and obligations to restructure society in a manner that respects the autonomy of all—including the least advantaged. And thus, an education that advances justice must teach children how to create democratic institutional arrangements and social practices that provide the least advantaged the ability to voice their opinion in public deliberation *and* to ensure all social arrangements can be accepted by all—including the least advantaged (Wheeler-Bell, 2012). Put simply: the analytical approach tends to treat the least advantaged as passive recipients of justice in need of pre-established goods, which must be distributed by pre-established institutions. The critical approach, conversely, views the least advantaged as active agents who are due the democratic rights and

obligations to participate in public deliberation, and exercise their public autonomy, to determine what goods should be produced, how they are produced, and what institutions should distribute said goods.<sup>2</sup>

### Section III: Social Justice Education, A Critical Approach

Expanding economic democracy and reducing economic domination are intrinsic to the advancement of justice. Thus, it would seem logical for a social justice education to teach privileged children how to deepen democracy into the economy (advancing economic democracy). While this is true, we should avoid hastily jumping from the problems of society to education's obligation to solve these problems. While education should teach students to advance justice and deepen democracy, this is not its sole purpose (Brighouse, 1998). Social justice education is one aim of education, but not the only aim. And because education has multiple aims, social justice educators should be aware of the moral tension between the demands of justice and other educational aims.

To properly analyze this moral tension, I need to separate two different aims of education: education for *private autonomy* and education for *public autonomy*. An education for *public autonomy*, or a social justice education, aims to teach children the skills, habits, and dispositions to both effectively engage in public deliberation *and* transform society in a manner that deepens democracy. As Habermas (1998) explains, public autonomy is the intersubjective form of self-governance that one exercises together with others in ensuring that all social practices affecting an individual's life meet the standards of public justification (Habermas, 1998; Rostboll, 2009). Exercising public autonomy also requires the ability to transform society in a manner that deepens democracy into social arenas that fail to meet the standards of public justification. For example, as noted above, our current economic system is undemocratically structured, and thus unreasonably limits the public autonomy of all citizens—especially the poor and working-class. Thus, to deepen democracy into the economy and expand public autonomy would entail dismantling the mechanisms of economic domination that prevent new democratic processes from being constructed, enabling individuals to collectively deliberate and determine how to structure the economy in a manner that meets the standards of public justification (Cunningham, 1987; Fung, 2003).

Because public autonomy is an intersubjective process it depends upon two civic virtues: *political awareness* and *political solidarity*. *Political awareness* requires an understanding of different normative ideas (e.g., justice, equality, and democracy) and the ability to discern how these normative ideas are influencing political disagreements (de-Shalit, 2006, p. 55-56). For instance, everyone has a “concept” of values like justice, equality, and democracy, but individuals will differ in how they interpret these values, meaning they have different “conceptions” of these values.<sup>3</sup> These different and competing conceptions of normative values impact how individuals interpret particular social problems (Warnke, 1994). Developing children's political awareness means helping them understand how different individuals interpret the world with different moral languages, and how these differences affect an individual's political perspectives. *Political solidarity*, on the other hand, is the willingness to respond to a particular situation in solidarity with the least advantaged. This means being politically aware of the

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<sup>2</sup> The critical approach does not dispute the tensions and conflicts in values. However, it does disagree with what values are at odds with each other, as well as the process of determining what values are more important and why.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am building from Rawls's (1971) distinction between a concept of justice and a conception of justice.



situations of the least advantaged and acting collectively with those who are disadvantaged to bring about change (Brunkhorst, 2005; Pinsky, 2009). Furthermore, political solidarity includes acknowledging the ways in which privilege functions and being willing to refuse certain privileges or to use one's privileges to advance justice (see Scholz, 2003).

The other aim of education is the cultivation of *private autonomy*. Private autonomy, as Habermas (1998) argues, is about the opportunities to personally flourish without having one's actions publicly scrutinized; this includes, but is not limited to, establishing healthy friendships and family relationships, using leisure time to engage in meaningful social activities such as sports or hobbies, and other activities that contribute to one's personal well-being. An education for private autonomy, then, aims to provide children with the opportunity to personally flourish. When education promotes private autonomy, the aim is to provide students with opportunities to engage in activities that they find personally fulfilling, even if such activities are unrelated to their political or civil obligations.

While public and private autonomy are different dimensions of autonomy, the configuration of the public and private realms is neither static, ahistorical, nor incontestable. As Kevin Olson explains,

[T]hese two forms are interlocking and mutually supporting in the sense that each presupposes the other. A secure status as a private individual is needed to participate in the public political process. ... At the same time, public autonomy is needed as participatory freedom to spell out the details of private life and protest it. (2006, p. 143)

Because these two forms of autonomy are contextually determined, they can, and often do, conflict. In fact, class privilege is partly reproduced when these forms of autonomy are systematically misaligned, and thus conflicting. For example, middle-class families often frame school choice in the language of private autonomy, in which they assume they have "the right" to choose schools even if such policies reproduce class domination and adversely affect the least advantaged (Ball, 2003). In this case, middle-class parents are misframing school choice policies within the language of private autonomy by wrongly assuming they should *not* be held publicly accountable for the schools they send their children to. Properly framing school choice, in this case, would mean that parents should have the right to exercise their private autonomy to choose schools only after democratic decision-making processes have publicly determined the types of schools from which parents can choose. The example of school choice is merely an illustration that the line between public and private autonomy must be democratically determined, and that their misalignment can reproduce domination.

Even though public and private autonomy can conflict, these two different dimensions of autonomy must be respected when educating children: an education that overemphasizes public autonomy can be equally as problematic as an education that overemphasizes private autonomy (Rostboll, 2009). Thus, we want a social justice education that reasonably respects privileged children's right to private autonomy while also acknowledging education's role in developing their public autonomy, and helping students understand their obligation to deepen democracy. This does not mean education should promote private autonomy unreflectively. Teachers should help children understand the dynamic relationship between public and private, specifically the way in which the pathology of privilege is partly reproduced by over-emphasizing private autonomy. Nonetheless, the task of a social justice education is to help students understand the importance of public and private autonomy as well as the ways in which these dimensions of autonomy become misaligned—and in our case, misaligned to reproduce class domination.

## Section IV: Three Approaches to Social Justice for the Privileged Class

Our task in moving forward is to identify the approach to social justice education best equipped to address the tensions between public and private autonomy without depoliticizing the education privileged students should receive to advance justice and deepen democracy into the economy. The three approaches I will evaluate are: (1) *class suicide*; (2) *political apathy*; (3) *civic volunteerism*.

### Class Suicide

The class suicide approach claims that privileged students did not earn their privilege, and thus have no right to enjoy *any* of the benefits attached to their class position. Consequently, because students earned their class privilege unjustly, they ought to renounce *all* advantages derived from their class status and align themselves with the oppressed. The role of social justice education, within this approach, is to help children understand why their class privilege is unjust and why they are obligated to renounce *all* privileges—no matter the personal cost—in the interest of liberating the least advantaged.<sup>4</sup>

While the class suicide approach seems enticing, it has two shortcomings. First, this approach confuses guilt with civic responsibility. Guilt, as Young (2011b) argues, is a particular type of moral responsibility wherein an individual is blameworthy for an action they committed or failed to commit which resulted in some harm. Civic responsibility, on the other hand, refers to what we owe others based upon our responsibilities as citizens or as human beings (see pp. 75–95). To oversimplify this distinction: An individual is guilty of a moral wrong when they intentionally committed a wrongful act which they should be sanctioned for, even if the sanction causes them undue alienation. Civic responsibility, on the other hand, is not about the moral wrongs committed *per se*, but about the acts we should commit because of our responsibilities to others. While the line between guilt and responsibility is difficult to discern, we can safely say children are not guilty of intentionally reproducing class domination because they had little, if any, role in influencing the structural factors causing class domination. Thus, the class suicide approach is unjustified in requiring or even advocating that children give away *all* their advantages, because they are not guilty of any particular moral wrong. However, children are still civically responsible for advancing justice, which does require giving up some (but not all) of their privileges. This point will be expanded upon shortly.

Second, this approach would cause privileged students undue alienation because it demands children take on a level of civic responsibility that unreasonably limits their right to exercise private autonomy. For instance, privileged children have developed meaningful bonds with their family, friends, and community members that are tied to their class privilege. Thus, requiring privileged students to give up all their advantages would mean renouncing their family and friends, and the networks built within these relationships. This would cause them undue alienation because it takes away their right to private autonomy: the right to enjoy meaningful commitments that are separate from their civic responsibilities. This is not to say privileged individuals should not sacrifice certain advantages to

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<sup>4</sup> This argument is found more within leftist political circles rather than scholarly articles. For the closest scholarly argument of this sort, see (McLaren, 2005)). However, I am not attributing this approach to Peter McLaren.

advance justice—indeed, they should. The point is to help students understand how the line between the public and private sphere gets distorted to reproduce class domination (political awareness), and to help them understand what are justifiable and unjustifiable sacrifices that must be made to deepen democracy into the economy. In general, a social justice education should help students develop a framework of values which will assist them in making morally justified future decisions on how to reasonably balance the demands of justice with the right to private autonomy.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the flaws with this approach, it has redeeming qualities. This approach correctly notes the importance of developing privileged children's political awareness of class domination and why democratizing the economy is desirable. It also highlights the fact that helping privileged students understand their civic obligation to advance justice will require a certain degree of sacrifice on their part (Cullity, 2004).

### **Political Apathy**

The political apathy approach claims that education should not focus on “saving the world” because doing so encourages unreasonably biased teaching. This position is represented by Stanley Fish in his book *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Fish, 2012). Fish argues schools should not focus on social problems like racism, class privilege, homophobia, ecological disasters, *etcetera*; instead, education should focus on two goals: (1) introducing students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry they had not previously known; (2) equipping students with the analytical skills that will enable them to move confidently within academic traditions. This apolitical stance can be achieved, according to Fish, by “academicizing” politically charged issues, which means detaching political issues from the context of their real-world urgency and inserting them into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed (Fish, 2012, p. 27).

Although Fish's idea of “academicizing” issues is vague, the general idea is to teach an academic subject for its intrinsic value, not for some utilitarian value like civic empowerment. Fish argues that teachers should academicize politically charged issues because he thinks much of what is considered social justice education is masking as a leftist ideology. He believes social justice education is a form of unreasonably biased teaching because it fails to respect the diversity of political perspectives. To avoid this problem, Fish argues, teachers should *not conflate analysis with activism* because one cannot simultaneously allow students to autonomously choose their own political perspective while also encouraging civic engagement that advances democratic justice.

While the political apathy approach has some value, it also has shortcomings. First, this approach misrepresents democracy's role in determining the purpose of education. As explained above, the purpose of education cannot be determined prior to the deliberative process; instead, the democratic process determines the purpose of education. If democracy decides that “saving the world” is a worthwhile educational goal, then schools are obligated to teach children how to change society. In addition, this approach assumes social justice educators *must conflate analysis with activism*. For instance, once an education for public autonomy is democratically established, schools are obligated to ensure children develop well-informed opinions on the value of political engagement within their own lives. This also entails learning how to deal with political disagreements. The existence of political

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Natasha Levinson for this point.

disagreements does not paralyze the democratic process or prevent teaching across said disagreements (Hess, 2009). Dealing with disagreements is a fundamental facet and virtue of democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Moreover, as research illustrates, children are less likely to understand the value of civic participation and deliberate across disagreements if they have not had the opportunity to become civically engaged within settings where disagreements emerge (Hamilton, Levine, & Youniss, 2009; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010).

Finally, this approach is especially ill-suited for privileged students because it reproduces the pathologies of privilege by over-intellectualizing political issues. By this I mean turning political issues into ideas to be thought over and debated, but detached from their political significance. For instance, part of the problem with the pathology of privilege is that privileged students develop habits and dispositions wherein they treat issues with a sense of ease and comfort, and thus do not take issues seriously enough to get bothered by problems or situations (Khan, 2010). Challenging this pathology requires placing privileged students in situations where they must listen to and deliberate with others—particularly those who are less well-off—and where they face the real consequences of their political opinions (Laden, 2013). By turning all political issues into academic issues, the apathy approach prevents teachers from placing privileged children within real political situations where privileged students must enter into meaningful deliberation with the less well-off and work to collectively solve problems.

Although the political apathy approach is flawed, it raises a cautionary point worth noting: Political issues are far more complex than we assume, and teachers must provide students with the space to analyze the complexities behind said issues before hastily promoting activism. But this cautionary note does not mean reflection supersedes actions; teachers simply must judiciously balance reflection and action.

### **Civic Volunteerism**

The civic volunteerism approach is the most common approach in social justice education. Generally speaking, civic volunteerism focuses on short-term issues—such as food banks, trash clean-up, and after-school reading programs—where there is little political disagreement or discussion on structural injustices (Levinson, 2012, pp. 169–210). Teachers choose the civic volunteerism approach for several good and bad reasons. First, civic volunteerism allows teachers to avoid controversial issues. Projects such as establishing food banks, registering voters, or reading to children raise little controversy with students and guardians, thus making it easier to justify to parents and administrators (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Second, civic organizations cover a plurality of political perspectives, thus teachers can encourage participation while appearing “neutral” or “nonpartisan” (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

While civic volunteerism is essential to democracy, social justice education should also be wary of using civic volunteerism as a means to develop privileged students’ public autonomy for two reasons. First, civic volunteerism tends to reproduce the problem of privileged paternalism because many civic organizations are not structured to deal with structural issues, nor do they promote democratic deliberation. As Eliasoph (2011) explains, civic volunteerism can be demeaning and belittling to those it seeks to serve by reproducing the stigma that individuals are “disadvantaged” and in need of help. These initiatives are often designed and run by the affluent, and tend to place democratic deliberation at

the margins of the organizational structure. As a result, they tend to inaccurately speak for others by assuming they know what is in the best interest of the least advantaged. In addition, they ineffectively deal with class exclusion because they provide few opportunities for the least advantaged to be trained on how to design and run civic organizations, thus they do not optimize spaces for those who are disadvantaged to gain the capabilities needed to represent themselves within the deliberative process (Eliasoph, 2013).

The second problem with civic volunteerism is that many civic organizations are focused more on civic engagement rather than social transformation; as a result, they tend to promote “thin” forms of public autonomy, rather than “thicker” forms aimed at expanding democracy. For example, public autonomy is expanded, or thickened, the more opportunities individuals have to engage in public deliberation and cooperate with others to solve particular social problems. Civic volunteerism insufficiently expands public autonomy because it typically focuses on short-term volunteering, such as food-banks or after-school reading projects. Furthermore, many civic organizations are not structured to promote learning across class differences, nor are they structured to directly challenge and eliminate the social conditions that cause class injustices (Eliasoph, 2013). As a result, they are not the most optimal sites for helping privileged children understand and challenge class domination.

My criticism of civic volunteerism is not a denouncement of civic organizations, nor am I saying teachers who encourage civic volunteerism intentionally reproduce the pathology of privilege. I note the weakness of civic volunteerism to bring into focus the problems faced when assuming civic engagement is an end in and of itself. When this happens, teachers can overlook the ways in which certain sites of civic engagement reproduce the pathology of privilege and class domination. If instead a social justice education is to expand privileged children’s public autonomy, which requires learning how to give and take justification even in uncomfortable situations, then students must also evaluate the sites of civic engagement and understand which civic organizations are more likely to advance justice.

## **Section V: Educating Activist Allies<sup>6</sup>**

The activist ally approach, as developed by Katy Swalwell (2013), aims to teach privileged students the skills, dispositions, and willingness to act in a manner that deepens democracy and reduces class domination. An “activist ally,” Swalwell argues, is a privileged individual who acts in political solidarity with the least advantaged by participating within social movements aimed at advancing economic democracy. The aim of the ally approach is to expand privileged children’s public autonomy by helping students understand the importance of re-networking their advantages within social movements. And by “re-networking their advantages” I mean helping privileged students use their bundle of privileges (e.g., cultural, financial, social capital) to advance justice within social movements that deepen democracy.

The ally approach cultivates the two interconnected virtues associated with public autonomy—*political solidarity* and *political awareness*—in the following manner. First, the ally approach increases children’s *political awareness* by teaching children how to analyze the ways different social institutions, including civic organizations, do or do not advance democracy. More specifically, political awareness must teach children how to understand the different normative ideas within a society (e.g., different

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<sup>6</sup> My conception of the activist ally approach slightly differs from Swalwell (2013) insofar as I normatively ground this term.

conceptions of justice, equality and democracy), how different normative ideas impact political disagreements, how class domination operates, and how to engage in reasonable deliberation across class lines. Cultivating political awareness aims to teach children the skills and dispositions needed to engage in reasonable deliberation and evaluate different positions with evidence and sound reasons.

The ally approach aligns with the “deliberative turn” in civic education, which focuses on ensuring children can engage in reasonable deliberation and listen to and learn from perspectives different from their own; however, it moves beyond mere deliberation insofar as it teaches privileged students about the importance of building a sense of political solidarity with the least advantaged.<sup>7</sup> As explained above, *political solidarity* is the willingness to respond to a particular situation in solidarity with the least advantaged, which includes being aware of the injustices they face and collectively acting with others to bring about change. Building political solidarity requires linking privileged students with social movements that deepen democracy into the economy. Building upon Melucci’s (1996) analytical definition of a social movement, a democratic social movement has four features: (1) *invokes solidarity*; (2) *manifests a conflict*; (3) *entails a breach of limits of capability of the system within which the action takes place*; (4) *seeks to increase public deliberation and manifest conflicts with the intent to deepen democracy* (p. 28). For example, the Occupy movements have sparked larger movements around cooperative businesses and democratizing financial institutions and banks. The basic income grant movement as well as the social housing movement are growing internationally. And civic innovation projects are putting pressure on businesses to implement structures of social entrepreneurship in which business decisions are more democratically responsive to the larger community (Malleon, 2014; Nicholls, 2008; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001; Wright, 2010). Social movements are apt spaces for invoking solidarity across divisive lines because they provide spaces for the least advantaged to contribute to the designing and running of said movements, and ensure their needs and interests are taken seriously (Hobson, 2004; Porta, 2009, 2013).

The ally approach focuses on social movements for several reasons. First, social movements are an effective means for creating radical social transformation and deepening democracy into the economy (Fox Piven & Cloward, 1978). Second, social movements are an effective means for creating radical social transformation because they operate semi-autonomously from traditional politics and have greater ability to include voices typically excluded from larger political structures (Giugni, McAdam, & Tilly, 1999; Wheeler-Bell, 2012). By operating slightly outside traditional politics, they open more spaces for discussing issues typically excluded within traditional political organizations, and to politically organize in ways that challenge the current political opportunity structure. Finally, social movements are the means by which individuals collectively repair civil society to better ensure they have more democratic control over the major aspects of their lives (Alexander, 2008). In sum, social movements open new spaces for marginalized groups as well as those who are privileged to come together, discuss contentious issues, and invoke the sense of solidarity necessary for addressing class domination and democratizing the economy.

The purpose of the ally approach is to help students critique and analyze social movements that are undermining economic democracy, to educate them about social movements aimed at advancing economic democracy, and to link them to those movements. The ally approach, however, does not require the entire school become a social movement nor does it force children to participate in a

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<sup>7</sup> My conception of deliberative democracy builds upon Iris Marion Young’s (2001) critique, as well as Archon Fung (2005) and Francesca Polletta’s (2015) response to this critique.

particular social movement. The point is to have students learn about different social movements, currently and historically, and engage in different social movements that would expand their public autonomy, specifically in ways that encourage public deliberation across class lines. To further clarify the ally approach, I want to explain how it avoids three issues found within the other approaches: *undue alienation*; *imbalance between activism and analysis*; and *privileged paternalism*.

### **Undue Alienation**

The ally approach lessens the possibility of causing *undue alienation* because, unlike the class suicide approach, this approach does not conflate guilt with civic responsibility; as a result, it is more attuned to the moral complexities and tensions between respecting students' private and public autonomy. For example, while both approaches advocate raising children's political awareness about class domination, the class suicide approach is inattentive to the moral tensions involved in developing privileged children's political solidarity. Generally speaking, raising political awareness is more of a cognitive process involving the evaluation of reasonable arguments and facts, whereas cultivating political solidarity is less a cognitive process *per se*, and more about developing the dispositions necessary for internalizing the political compassion necessary for advancing justice (O'Connell, 2009; Sayer, 2011; Swalwell, 2013; Tronto, 2013). However, cultivating political solidarity requires helping privileged students develop the moral framework and dispositions needed to determine for themselves the reasonable sacrifices they must make to advance justice. In this case, the task is to help students unpack the pathology of privilege, and understand how an overemphasis on private autonomy can distort our obligations to the least advantaged.<sup>8</sup>

When cultivating political solidarity, teachers must start by acknowledging how privileged students interpret the civic world and then *slowly* develop the emotional dispositions necessary for appropriately responding to the democratic demands of the least advantaged. The ally approach acknowledges that developing political solidarity is a slow and arduous process, and must be done in a manner that respects privileged children right to a reasonable degree of private autonomy. Nonetheless, the goal is to help students develop these dispositions by having them learn about and participate within social movements, while reflecting upon their participation. Having students participate within social movements is necessary because, as Melucci (1996) explains, these movements help "people feel a bond with others not because they share the same interest, but because they need that bond in order to make sense of what they are doing." Melucci (1996) goes on to argue, "the solidarity that ties individuals to each other enables them to affirm themselves as subjects of their action and to withstand the breakdown of social relations induced by conflict" (p.75). Thus, by connecting privileged students with social movements, the ally approach aims to provide privileged children with experiences where they can develop the moral framework needed to reasonably balance activism with analysis. The class suicide approach, on the other hand, is inattentive to this balance, and thus more likely to cause undue alienation and create unreasonable tension between public and private autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> While political awareness and solidarity are two features of public autonomy, it is not the case that one inherently leads to the other. Cultivating these virtues is difficult, albeit in different ways, and especially cumbersome for the privileged class (White, 2015).

## Balancing Activism and Analysis

While the ally approach advocates for children to participate within social movements, it does so in a manner that balances *analysis with activism*. Recall that expanding public autonomy requires cultivating two civic virtues: political awareness and political solidarity. Political awareness is about helping students understand different normative ideas (e.g., justice, equality, and democracy) and discern how these normative ideas are influencing political disagreements. Here the task is to have students engage with different political opinions, particularly around class lines, and analyze how these opinions affect political disagreements. This can be cultivated, for example, by having students set up and participate in a deliberation day around class issues. Deliberation days, as Ackerman and Fishkin (2005) explain, is a non-partisan social movement aimed at expanding public autonomy by having citizens come together to learn about particular issues, and then deliberate upon such issues. Furthermore, having students set up and participate in a deliberation day can provide them with an opportunity to work across class divides and meaningfully engage with people across such lines, without forcing children to adopt a particular political perspective *per se*. In fact, participating in a deliberation day could help students understand that one's class position does not directly align with one's political affiliations: poor people can be conservative, and the rich can be radical. The main reason privileged students need to participate within social movements where the least advantaged are actively present and occupy positions of power is to learn how to give and take justifications about public issues, and do so in a manner where they must hear from those affected by policies and opinions. The point is not to have students participate in social movements unreflectively and passively accept the goals of the movement. Rather, the purpose of this approach is to place students in environments where they must listen to, learn from, and reasonably engage with opinions that are unfamiliar to them. And more importantly, it places students in situations where they can receive authentic responses for the opinions and perspectives they hold—even if such situations are unnerving. Having real public deliberations with people who hold different opinions is essential for privileged students because to critically reflect upon their ideological perspective they must have their worldview meaningfully challenged. In other words, the type of analysis, or reflective spaces, needed to understand the pathology of privilege is more likely to occur in situations where students must face the real consequences of the opinions they hold, and social movements are apt spaces for students to encounter these real consequences.

However, the ally approach avoids becoming another “apolitical” form of teaching by helping children *fairly* and *reasonably* evaluate different normative perspectives, and evaluate which movements are more likely to expand democracy. In this sense, children should be provided opportunities to participate within social movements focused on addressing structural issues; however, they should be given the necessary educational spaces to reflect upon their participation. Reflecting upon one's participation entails helping students analyze the different values being advanced by certain movements, and to understand for themselves which movements are more likely to advance justice and why. In this sense, the ally approach is not merely a critique of conservative movements; instead, the task is to help students understand that all social movements are comprised of contradictory demands—liberal, conservative, and radical movements alike. Nonetheless, teachers should also help students understand why certain movements are better positioned to deepen democracy than others. A failure to teach students how to evaluate the moral worth of different movements is educationally unjustified, and reproduces the same problems faced by the civic volunteerism approach.



## Privileged Paternalism

Unlike the civic volunteerism approach, the ally approach avoids *privileged paternalism* because it focuses on raising privileged students' *political awareness* about class domination, thus helping students “connect the dots” between structural injustices, their own privileges, and social practices that reproduce class domination. The ally approach helps children critically evaluate how different sites of civic engagement reproduce or challenge structural injustices, whereas the civic volunteerism approach insufficiently teaches students how to analyze the power relationship embedded within different sites of civic engagement. Without teaching students how unjustified power relations are reproduced within certain civic organizations, they are less likely to understand how certain civic organizations reproduce privileged paternalism, and why such organizations fail to challenge structural injustices (Eliasoph, 2013). Conversely, by educating privileged children on how power influences different forms of civic engagement, the ally approach helps them understand the structural factors causing class domination, how to evaluate different sites of civic engagement, and how power operates within volunteer organizations to reproduce class domination (Gourevitch, Lake, & Stein, 2012).

In addition, because the ally approach focuses on social movements and building political solidarity, it is better suited to address the pathology of privilege and its role in reproducing privilege paternalism. The pathology of privilege, if we recall, is partly reproduced because privileged individuals assume they have legitimately earned their advantage. Thus, they are less likely to give credibility to the class demands of the least advantaged. As Habermas (1987) argues, one of the most effective ways of challenging ideological worldviews is by placing individuals within “shared life-worlds” so they can learn from, be challenged by, and be accountable to others within the communicative process (Rostboll, 2009, pp. 133–151). Social movements serve this function because they create “shared life-worlds” amongst individuals with differing viewpoints, and in doing so they provide new public spaces where individuals can collectively discuss contentious issues (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991).

Social movements do face tensions and difficulties in cultivating political solidarity. For one, some movements do not want to cultivate solidarity across particular lines. In addition, participating within a movement does not guarantee political solidarity will be developed. Despite these and other shortcomings, social movements are more apt at cultivating political solidarity across lines of social contentions than conventional forms of politics. Thus, while social movements have their difficulties and shortcomings they are better suited to address the pathology of privilege than traditional forms of political engagement, which means having privileged students participate within such movements increases the likelihood that their ideological perspectives will be challenged. In the end, social movements are not perfect but they are some of the most effective spaces for helping students develop the dispositions for becoming activist allies (McAdam, 1990).

## Conclusion

Vast inequalities in wealth and income are neither justified nor sustainable. Such conditions are creating what Therborn (2013) calls a “killing field of inequality”: gross inequalities that directly result in the death of millions of individuals worldwide and the potential destruction of the planet. Lessening these

inequalities requires collective mobilization by both the privileged and the least advantaged. Only by building social movements aimed at advancing economic democracy can we ensure such inequalities are reduced and human flourishing is maximized. Currently, we are witnessing new, and some old, movements emerging around economic democracy. While social movements around economic democracy are small, they do exist, and their expansion depends upon larger social support. These movements would greatly benefit from support by the privileged class because they have access to networks of capital which could be “re-networked” to advance justice and economic democracy. In this sense, a social justice education should teach privileged students about their social responsibility to advance economic democracy. Privileged students must be taught the value of a deep democracy and egalitarian society as well as their moral obligation to help create said society. Such an education does not require being unreasonably biased or assuming privileged students must face undue alienation to advance justice. Instead, a social justice education for the privileged must reasonably balance activism with analysis by developing students’ political awareness about class domination as well as the political solidarity required to act in a manner that deepens democracy and transforms unjust economic arrangements. While schools are not solely liable for such an education, they are an essential institution for providing privileged students with a social justice education. And while the activist ally approach cannot guarantee radical social transformation, it is a morally appropriate yet critical approach to educating privileged children to re-network their advantages in ways that challenge class domination.

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