

The War on Public Education: Agonist Democracy and the Fight for Schools as Public Things

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Article abstract

Agonistic critiques of democratic theory conceptualize democracy as a site of conflict and struggle; as the fight against privatization escalates, these critiques become more relevant for educational governance. Public education governance has, in addition, increasingly been the site of growing conflicts between federal, states and local levels, as populist and other types of dissent are now emerging in educational politics. These conflicts reached a new nexus with the nomination of Betsy DeVos as U.S. Secretary of Education. This nomination represents a vivid battle over public school as a “public thing,” a material object, space, institution or place of symbolic and embodied civic importance (Honig 2017). DeVos’ nomination stirred up, in popular imagination, the idea of public schools as “public things” of meaning and value for many citizens who participated in unprecedented ways to (unsuccessfully) block her appointment. It was with this threat to public education that the value of school as a “public thing” became crystalized among a diverse network of citizens. This political moment reveals 1) the nature of schools as public things, 2) the importance of agonist critiques of democracy, and public work, as a means for citizens to help safe-guard the future of schools as public things. I conclude by explaining the limits of agonism as a comprehensive approach to the democratic governance of schooling, advocating for its use as a critique and expansion of current models of public engagement with educational politics.

The War on Public Education: Agonist Democracy and the Fight for Schools as Public Things

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Abstract: Agonistic critiques of democratic theory conceptualize democracy as a site of conflict and struggle; as the fight against privatization escalates, these critiques become more relevant for educational governance. Public education governance has, in addition, increasingly been the site of conflicts between federal, state and local levels, as populist and other types of dissent are now emerging in educational politics. These conflicts reached a new peak with the nomination of Betsy DeVos as U.S. Secretary of Education. This nomination represented a pitched battle over public school as a “public thing,” a material object, space, institution or place of symbolic and embodied civic importance (Honig, 2017). DeVos’s nomination stirred up, in popular imagination, the idea of public schools as “public things” of meaning and value for many citizens who participated in unprecedented ways to (unsuccessfully) block her appointment. It was with this threat to public education that the value of school as a “public thing” became crystalized among a diverse network of citizens. This political moment reveals (1) the nature of schools as public things and (2) the importance of agonist critiques of democracy, and public work, as a means for citizens to help safe-guard the future of schools as public things. I conclude by explaining the limits of agonism as a comprehensive approach to the democratic governance of schooling, advocating for its use as a critique and expansion of current models of public engagement with educational politics.

Over one year into the administration of President Donald Trump, many citizens and educational leaders feel the full threat and power of neoliberal attacks on public education in the United States. The future of public schooling may well rely on the expansion and proliferation of publics for public schools. A public, in the context of public schooling issues and problems, is an association of citizens who will critique, support, engage with, and help build the educational and civic capacity of their public schools (Knight Abowitz, 2014). Publics for public schools continue to be not only a mainstay of democratic school governance practices, but even more fundamentally in this era of unprecedented federal pressure for privatization of schooling, educational publics may be part of a political effort to hold in place some version of a publicly funded network of universal education. This article analyzes the critical role of conflict and dissent in this political effort by using agonist critiques of democracy to analyze the case study of Betsy DeVos’s successful nomination to the office of Secretary of Education in late 2016 and early 2017. The DeVos nomination is a study of how a public formed in response to a *public thing* under attack; a public thing, in this case, being the institution of public schools, those material (and symbolic)

objects that exist in zip codes around the nation, buildings that have tangible and psychic connections to citizens' daily lives (Honig, 2017).

Building publics for public schools relies on public work, both in terms of conflict and deliberation, such as seen in community organizing as well as deliberative organizational work on behalf of school reform efforts. The work of educational publics expands liberal dialogical models of governance by highlighting conflict's important contributions and the highly pluralist nature of educational politics. Certain agonist conceptions of democratic politics play a key role in this expansion of deliberative models. Ruitenberg's summary of agonism begins to explain why this expansion is so crucial: "political conflict is ... not a problem to be overcome, but rather a force to be channeled into political and democratic commitments" (2009, p. 272).

The word "agonistic" is from the Greek word *agon* which means "struggle." Agonist critiques of democracy are meant to dislodge some of the assumptions and dominance of liberal and pragmatist political theory (Schaap, 2007). To describe public life as agonistic does not mean that deliberation is impossible; it means that public work, deliberation, and decision-making will always contain varying degrees of difference and contention. In regards to educational governance, policy-making and curriculum, public leaders and educators must not only be prepared and skilled at working through these contentions, but understand them as important work of the political imagination and leadership in educational sites (Todd, 2010; Tryggvason, 2017).

Visible, vicious public conflicts characterize our political age. Conflicts over the fundamental premises of public education are but some of the many disagreements that are being fought in the media, in the legislatures, in the streets, and on social media. Agonistic critiques bring the inevitability of certain types of conflict into the frame of educational governance and citizenship/education, and disrupt the notion that pure rational consensus should be the assumed and unchallenged norm of how we govern these institutions and systems. Agonist critiques can help us normalize peaceful conflict—and by normalize, I mean create customs, habits, and other types of (explicit and implicit, embodied) knowledge that help us manage and live within conflict—instead of seeing conflict as "broken" democracy or educational governance. Certainly, conflict can break political systems, but agonist critiques help us make peace with the fact that conflict is endemic to healthy political ecosystems striving for principles of equity, inclusion and responsibility.

It is because of the presence of conflict and the threat to public education that the value of school as a public thing became crystalized in the DeVos nomination, which can be considered a unique case study for public education governance. Through exploration of this case, I argue that this political moment reveals (1) a widespread recognition among a group of citizens of the nature of public schools as public things, and (2) the importance of associative agonist views of democracy, and public work, as a means for citizens to help safe-guard the future of these public things.

Agonistic critics argue that disagreement and conflict are to be expected in the normal conduct of democratic states, but they also argue that conflict can foster new forms of identity and solidarity. Mouffe puts it like this: "Public life will never be able to dispense with antagonism for it concerns public action and the formation of collective identities. It attempts to constitute a 'we' in a context of diversity and conflict" (n.d., para. 4). I argue here that agonistic theories are particularly useful for our contemporary moment as they, perhaps surprisingly, hold potential to create notions of a "we" among a diverse populace. This contingent "we" is possible, say agonist critics, without collapsing difference or attempting to contain conflict through the hegemony of tradition, majoritarian domination, or other types of

authoritarian moves. That “we,” in this case, was the result of an identity formation process based in a shared valuing of public education institutions—valuing expressed locally through public work in actual schools, as well as through the valuing of one type of educational structure—a publicly funded, universally accessible system of elementary and secondary education.

To begin analyzing the case of the DeVos nomination, I first provide context. In part one, I explore the ways that DeVos’s nomination crystallized a political reality that some educational observers have observed for a while now: there is a war on public education in the United States. DeVos, a proponent of privatization in her home state of Michigan, was nominated as a secretary candidate who would push an agenda of charters and vouchers, and thereby weaken public schools (if not by intention, then by consequence). DeVos’s nomination process, including citizens’ reactions to and involvement in that process, constitutes an exemplification of the war on public education, an important fact to consider in interpreting the great public resistance to her nomination process.

In part two, I explore agonistic critiques; in particular, the work of political theorist Bonnie Honig (1993, 2001, 2007, 2017). Rejecting accounts of political life as administrative, juridical, or otherwise proceduralist in nature, Honig uses Nietzsche and Arendt to examine politics from a different point of view, with an eye towards those excluded or left on the margins, the remainders of political settlements, administrative, legislative, or legal processes. These remainders of political settlement bring conflict and contention to democratic states. Such remainders are not to be swept under the rug, but represent important civic moments of passionate possibility for imagining new democratic futures through public work (Pearce & Honig, 2013). Honig’s agonism is related to Mouffe’s, but distinct in how she identifies theoretical starting points, a difference that Glover (2012) names as “associative” versus “disassociative agonism,” a distinction I will later explain.

More significantly for my argument here, Honig’s work has of late become more materialist. Honig’s *Public Things* (2017) offers an agonistic theory for understanding how we make things like schools, lands, swimming pools or sewers into objects of shared value and collective care through an Arendtian-derived notion of public work. In part three of this paper, I examine Honig’s public thing theory and the associative agonism she embraces, as well as its relevance for public schooling governance. Making things public does not resolve conflict but offers a way to see how various versions of “we” are imperfectly but consistently constituted through public things realized through public work and educational decision-making at differing levels of governance. The solution to the contemporary question of public education’s survival is about more, not less, public work and public participation in educational governance.

As shown in part four, agonist critiques and the public work they attempt to inform constitute a necessary part—but only a part—of a complex fabric of governance praxis in public educational institutions and systems. Agonist critiques of representative, associative and deliberative democratic theory are not whole articulations of distinct democratic theory meant to stand alone (Schaap, 2007). The work of constituting publics for public schooling requires more than agonistic theory alone to explain or understand its intricacies and movements. The conflicts of imaginative, passionate agonist eruptions require great civic energy and commitment, but also capacities for relational politics across difference, so essential to public work.

The Nomination of Betsy DeVos for U.S. Secretary of Education

Gerald Bracey (2004) wrote a canary-in-a-coal-mine analysis of the No Child Left Behind law after it passed in the United States in 2001:

NCLB is a masterpiece of a law to accomplish the opposite of what it apparently intends. While claiming to be the law that—finally!—improves public education, NCLB sets up public schools to fail, setting the stage for private education companies to move in on the \$400 billion spent annually on K–12 education. ... The consequent destruction or reduction of public education would shrink government and cripple or eliminate the teachers' unions, nearly five million mostly Democratic voters. (p. 62)

Bracey and others have regularly documented the war on public education in the intervening years since NCLB was passed (Christakis, 2017).

The case of Betsy DeVos's successful yet highly contested nomination to the Secretary of Education post is a significant battle won by those who have waged war on public education for several decades. DeVos represents a key victory for those who wish to privatize public education through for-profit charter corporations and voucher programs funneling money to private and religious schools. Yet DeVos's nomination garnered, for many different reasons, an extraordinary showing of public speech and action waged against her nomination. This nomination process represented an agonistic political moment where a democratic "we" emerged in opposition to her appointment. Some of the reasons for the opposition were not admirable ones, but as we have seen over and over again in these last months, politics makes for very odd bedfellows indeed.

DeVos, heir to the Amway Corporation, comes from an enormously wealthy family in Michigan, where she and her family have for many years been deeply involved in Republican politics and education lobbying. As a person who comes from "conservative Christian royalty with deep roots in Republican politics" (Reitman, 2017, para. 2), DeVos was on the front lines of moving the school choice agenda aggressively forward in her home state. Though not an overt supporter of Trump during the election, she symbolizes the powerful coalition that nonetheless helped to elect him President of the United States in November 2016; as a conservative Christian who is committed to market-based reforms, she counts as allies both the Koch Brothers and the Family Research Council. And as a lobbyist for educational choice in Michigan (an early adopter of school choice policy in the US), as well as a prominent Republican campaign funder, she wrote in 1997 that she was unashamedly buying influence on educational policy in her state. In a quote that surfaced in multiple articles around the time of her nomination, DeVos said that "I have decided ... to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence. Now I simply concede the point. They are right. We do expect some things in return" (Edwards, 2016, para. 5). Tapped to carry out Trump's promises to offer choice programs to "every American child living in poverty," DeVos's credentials are extremely fitting to the task at hand (Wright, 2016, para. 3). As U.S. Secretary of Education, she has certainly now gotten a very big "something in return" for all those donations.

Nominees for U.S. Secretary of Education have typically sailed through hearings with bipartisan support. Throughout the Obama and George W. Bush presidencies, there was a bi-partisan "center" on educational policy (Resmovits, 2017), much to the dismay of those to the left and the right of that center. DeVos blew up the center, moving the educational agenda further to the right than it has (arguably) yet been at the federal level in the United States.

The outpouring of public commentary against DeVos was unprecedented for a nomination to the office, by most accounts. One observer, a long-time educational expert for House Democrats, said, “I’ve never seen opposition like this” (Resmovits, 2017, para. 13). “Following DeVos’ confirmation hearing, teachers, unions, activists and at least one fellow billionaire flooded Congress with opposition—some 1.5 million calls a day to Senate offices” (Resmovits, 2017, para. 12). For the first time in Senate history, the Vice President cast the tie-breaking vote needed to approve a secretarial nomination. Only three days after her nomination vote, she was blocked by protesters from entering a public school in Washington, DC. A man protesting on the scene shouted “shame, shame, shame” after yelling at her that she had bought her nomination through campaign donations (Blake, 2017).

Various groups representing diverse interests lined up to protest this nomination. Disability rights advocates and families were concerned that she would not uphold U.S. laws guaranteeing inclusion rights; families of LGBTQ youth were concerned about her commitment to upholding civil rights laws; liberals of many stripes were wary of her interest in crossing the church–state boundaries by funneling public education dollars into religious institutions; teachers’ unions, university deans of education, and parents of public school students saw her privatization agenda as a genuine threat to public schooling traditions (Wong, 2017). Hundreds of educational organizations signed a joint letter urging the U.S. Senate to reject her nomination (Ujifusa, 2017). While her educational politics worried many on the center to center-left in educational politics, her identity certainly played a role as well. Amy Shuffleton (2017), for example, provides a smart analysis of how DeVos’s gender fanned the flames of the protests against her. Sexism fed the dissent against her, without a doubt. Her identity as a super-rich lobbyist who has never set foot in a public school nor sent any of her children to one raised class-based animus against her as well. While not part of this specific analysis, these protests against her politics and actions as Secretary of Education have continued. One in response to her appearance at Harvard University in September 2017 shows the lingering hostility toward DeVos. After her speech got underway, students silently stood up and unfurled signs with such messages as “Our Students are not 4 Sale,” “Reclaiming my Democracy,” and “Protect Survivors’ Rights,” the last in response to her recent moves to reverse Obama-administration campus sexual assault guidelines which sought to strengthen protections and responses (Einenkel, 2017). A recent news article documents the year-long activism that her nomination has spurred among educator groups (Klein, 2018).

The DeVos nomination triggered expressions of a long-simmering conflict in U.S. educational politics, wherein a “we” of citizenry that cut across partisan boundaries formed to oppose DeVos in a moment of widespread political warfare around the public aims of schooling. In these few weeks of intense political communication across cultural media, a “we” of citizens coalesced around the cause of public schooling’s future. As I elaborate below using agonist political theory, that “we” is a precious and powerful resource for citizens and possible futures for public education.

Agonist Critique: Making Sense of the DeVos Political Scene

Agonistic conceptions of political life emphasize the pluralism, as well as the growing problems of inequality and hegemony, in countries like the United States. The basic assumptions of agonism are akin to some theoretical frames used in educational politics and governance today. Community organizing strategies have in recent decades been effectively employed by groups working with parents, students and

other community groups trying to improve their schools (Knight Abowitz, 2014). Organizing traditions have often used confrontational politics among other tools for building power for disenfranchised citizens since the labor movements of the early twentieth century. Seeing educational politics as a struggle between powerful interests and less powerful citizens, community organizing politics often start from agonist views of democratic politics, but rarely do they explicitly draw from or connect to these theories, typically rooted in more class-based political theories.

Agonist critiques echo community organizing work in that they see intractable hegemonic relations as part and parcel of political life in our society. This hegemonic starting point, combined with today's radical economic inequality, yields Mouffe's view that "the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and legitimation of conflict" (2013, p. 7). Glover (2012) explains that agonism represents the struggle over democratic discourse—what's allowed, what can be said, how it can be expressed, and who is included at the table of exchange and power.

Agonistic pluralism offers us a novel means of approaching democratic discourse, receptive to the claims of new actors and identities while also recognizing that there must be some, albeit minimal, restrictions placed on the form that such democratic engagement takes. In short, the goal of agonists is not to "eradicate the use of power in social relations but to acknowledge its ineradicable nature and attempt to modify power in ways that are compatible with democratic values." (p. 82)

Democracies functioning well, Mouffe (2013) argues, have confrontations over political positions, and suppressing those confrontations has consequences. "If this is missing, there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications" (p. 7). Absent open confrontations around legitimate democratic differences, citizens become either apathetic or disaffected with political participation. Dissent is as necessary to well-functioning democracy as is consensus (Stitzlein, 2013), although the dissent is not between enemies, but between adversaries—the opponents with whom one shares commitment to general democratic principles.

Agonist critiques of democracy are not a singular body of thought; there are two threads of agonism, labeled dissociative and associative (Glover, 2012). While most educational theorizing around agonistic critiques draws from Mouffe's (2013) dissociative agonism, Honig's associative version is at least as compelling for educational contexts. Dissociative agonists like Mouffe emphasize the hegemonic power relations involved in agonistic conflicts, which are in some cases over non-negotiable values, and which "cannot be reconciled rationally" (p. 9). Mouffe's (neo)Marxist commitments drive her agonistic views, which she traces back to the influence of political thinker (and Nazi) Carl Schmitt, his critiques of liberalism, and his friend-enemy conception of politics (Mouffe, 1999). But associative agonists resist a friend-enemy approach to conceptualizing dissension, preferring to approach conflict and hegemony with more openness and possibility for political coalitions across difference. This more optimistic approach, Glover explains, means that associative agonists "advance a much more demanding set of agonistic virtues" than do their dissociative counterparts (2012, p. 91). These virtues seek to move us beyond liberal tolerance; Connolly's "critical responsiveness," for example, entails careful listening and presumptive generosity by citizens engaged in political engagement with diverse others (2005, p. 123). Associative agonists are attempting to engage with public spaces in which we, as citizens, "define our own identity, we craft our own subjectivity" (Glover, 2012, p. 91). Associative agonism recognizes that

our political identities and identifications are not stable, but characterized by openness and willingness to listen:

[A]n untethered and performative political area involves a certain trust that contentious and negotiation of difference does not devolve into chaos, violence, and conflict. Above all, the associative agonistic conception seeks to imbue in agonistic citizens an “openness to listen to those who appear to us to be unreasonable” while retaining a “willingness to question what counts as reasonable speech.” (Schaap, as cited in Glover, 2012, pp. 91–92)

This openness and sense of possibility in associative agonism is the reason why Honig has characterized agonism as an optimistic view of political possibility—a hopeful way of passionately engaging around common concerns in a pluralistic democratic polity in ways that challenge oppressive forms of normalization and exclusion (Pearce & Honig, 2013).

As I go on to explain in the next section, Honig has of late added a material dimension to her associative agonist vision, a key enhancement to agonistic views of democracy for those concerned with the fate of public education under neoliberal governmental conditions. The conception of public things enables us to theorize both the conflict represented in the DeVos nomination and the ways diverse citizens might respond to such events, in the process developing new forms of solidarity and collaboration amidst strong pluralism. As Honig asserts, “legitimizing democratic engagement in a deeply pluralistic democratic society involves the recognition that passionate attachment can exist alongside a deep and justifiable fear of those who destabilize the object of attachment” (2001, p. 109). Public things offer material possibilities for both engaging passionate attachment and overcoming some of the fear of the stranger that we will meet or embody in pluralistic public spaces and institutions.

These strangers, in education, may be racially, ethnically, religiously, or ideologically other to us. In school politics, the fights over fully-marketized, differentiated school choice policy versus policies supporting excellent, fully-funded and inclusive public schools are very real battles with tangible, material dimensions. The rise of DeVos as a wealthy philanthropist who now holds an important federal office in the educational governance structure is the perfect example of the kind of hegemonic political field that agonistic political critiques foresee and describe. The presence of school as a “public thing” provides a new way of thinking about how we engage those divides, using associative agonism to work, with imagination, in the political fray.

The central question that agonistic critics present is as follows: How might democratic societies enable the reworking of exclusions and alienations, amidst the numb proceduralism and “disrepair” of state bureaucratic politics, into new political worlds and spaces? (Honig, 2017) How do we channel hostility toward and hatred of the political stranger into a broader political imaginary of shared possibilities for educational futures? I believe that the response to the DeVos nomination was one such channeling. The nomination catalyzed a collective form of identification among diverse citizens with varying but consolidated interests in public education’s future. Honig’s public thing concept helps to explain how this collective identification, a “we” forming from diverse interests, may have been formed.

Public Schools as Public Things

Honig's notion of public things offers a materiality to agonist accounts of politics, a way of thinking about how object-mediated political relations can provide unexpected sources of democratic attachment and meaning. According to Honig,

democracy is rooted in common love for, antipathy to, and contestation of public things. Without public things, action in concert is undone and signs and symbols of democratic life are devitalized. ... Without public things, democracy is reduced to procedures, polling, and policing, all necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient conditions of democratic life. (2017, p. 4)

Honig's argument in *Public Things* combines the political theory of Hannah Arendt with the object-relations theory of psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. "Public things" are those material objects and spaces that are a shared and intractable part of democratic life. Parks, schools, streets, lands, libraries, bridges, prisons, and swimming pools are public things, shared spaces or places which represent democratic investment as well as struggle. Public things are not inherently good nor inherently bad. They have been and are wholly imperfect sites of democratic freedom and inclusion; the desegregation of public pools in the United States offers one example (Demby, 2015). Yet public things' enduring potential value for democracy lies in their ability to garner our collective energies and identities:

At their best, in their public thingness, they may bring peoples together to act in concert. And even when they are divisive, they provide a basis around which to organize, contest, mobilize, defend, or reimagine various modes of collective being together in a democracy. (Honig, 2017, p. 24)

I will lay out basic elements of Honig's argument here, before using it to analyze the DeVos nomination case.

Arendt's contribution to Honig's conception of public things is foundational. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states that "The *vita activa*, human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something, is always rooted in a world of [hu]man and [hu]man-made things" (Arendt, 1988, p. 22). *Vita activa* consists of three activities: Labor, Work and Action. Labor is the world of reproduction and consumption, the endless loops of caring for biological needs of self and loved ones as human beings; Work, on the other hand, is about production of material, durable things; and Action is giving birth to new ideas and meanings through speech and "political action in concert among equals" (Honig, 2017, p. 41). Honig focuses on the domain of Work, which she says is the spine of Arendt's theory. "The fabricated objects of Work provide shelter from the storms that Labor must weather" (p. 41). Laboring to put food on the table and clothing on our backs is sustained and given meaning by products of Work, produced with "hammers, nails and ploughs" (p. 41)—or, perhaps today, the digitized tools of *homo faber*. Here, Honig deviates from Arendt in a reconstruction of her argument in *The Human Condition*. While Arendt did not see Work as connected with public or political life, Honig wants to conceptualize Work's public purposes, in ways reminiscent of Harry Boyte's writings on public work's unique contributions to civic life (2011, 2015). Boyte defines public work as "self-organized efforts by a mix of people who solve common problems and create things, material or symbolic, of lasting civic value" (2011, p. 632–633).

So, thus far in Honig's argument, she has established the Arendtian notion of public work, a concept linked to thinkers and activists such as Boyte. Honig now turns to why and how the public things

generated by public work capture our psychological investments and identities. Our relationship as citizens to public things, the products of Work, is where Donald Winnicott (1964, 2005) enters this theoretical picture. Object-relations theory helps explain how public “things” acquire value and generate psychic attachment for us as citizens. Winnicott was a pediatrician and psychoanalyst who studied human development, and was particularly interested in how the “good enough mother” helped an infant through early milestones by enabling relationships to valued objects like a favorite toy or blanket. These “transition objects” offer a way for the child to manage the transition to individual subjectivity and the fearful aspects of separation of self, mother and world. “Good enough mothers” provide “holding environments” for this transition to self-hood: supportive environments where care-givers provide empathy and allow for the integration of self over time. In these environments, babies need transitional objects to learn about the permanence of the external world and construct their own subjectivity in response to it. For the baby, the toy’s permanence—its cohesion or unitarity as an object—is a resource for emerging understandings of self.

Where Arendt and Winnicott meet is this: public things produced by a kind of Arendtian public work provide us with objects, institutions, spaces, and places that offer meaning, a sense of permanence, and self-definition. An historic bridge, school, or public library might provide a town with a sense of itself as a place. So might a prison or an oil pipeline or a cemetery. A school’s relative permanence, its symbolic importance and materiality in space and time make it a significant civic holding environment. Our relations to these public things, or “object-relations” in psychoanalytic terms, help create our identities as citizens. These public things “constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship” (Honig, 2017, p. 5). Honig sums this up:

In political theory, we might attend in particular to the power of *public* things to stimulate the object relations of democratic collectivity ... [P]ublic things are the infrastructure of democratic life, and they underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity that, for the moment, still survive. (p. 17, emphasis in original)

The public work of building, maintaining, re-building and sometimes destroying public things “help[s] collect diverse citizens into self-governing publics divested (like Winnicott’s maturing infants) of fantasies of omnipotence and invested with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency, and concern” (p. 17). Honig explains our attachments to public things generated through an Arendtian notion of work by using the psychoanalytic dimension, and the creative, conflictual struggles over public things by adding agonist theory’s assumption of hegemonic political conditions.

My contention is that the DeVos nomination is a significant case study of the rediscovery and the reconstitution of schools as a public thing for many Americans, for whom these schools were invisible or simply taken-for-granted. School, as we know, is both a symbolic and a material thing. The institution has been created over time, with layer upon layer of history, legends, stories, and practices sometimes enlightening, sometimes boring, and sometimes oppressive and painful. Six out of seven days of any week of most months, the public school is a site of continued public work: volunteers show up to tutor early readers or students learning to speak English, parents organize the candy sale to raise funds for the band uniforms, teachers plan interdisciplinary units on the Harlem Renaissance, students create a drama production for the community, irate parents organize a letter-writing campaign to protest proposed budget cuts to a beloved school program, school board members deliberate teacher contracts, coaches work with students on plays for the upcoming game, students do internships in community organizations,

public health nurses come in to do eye screenings, art teachers work with a parent and students to hang displays of student work in locations around the community. Schools as collective identifications, not just buildings, are materially and symbolically created every day through such actions by students, teachers, and citizens. These actors with/in public schools create something in common with others not because they all pay the same tuition, signed on to a shared curriculum vision, or belong to the same religion, but because they are part of a shared world, the shared world of the community's school. The school is an object in which we invest meaning and a shared sense of identity. Some of this meaning, as Winnicott's theory suggests, is derived not simply from shared work, but from "complicated sets of affective relations ... and ultimately also by fantasy" (Honig, 2017, p. 46). Our own imaginings and affective experiences with "school" over our lifetimes lead us to construct sometimes exaggerated realities of what schools do to us and for us, and what they mean in the material world. Such meanings can be collectively communicated for strategic purposes, such as the #standupforpubliceducation hashtag and similar national efforts to employ these meanings for activist purposes in the DeVos era.¹

Honig (2017) reminds us that public things are not inherently good; schools are sites of ongoing struggle, divisions and exclusions of various types. Sometimes, a shared sense of identity is built over suffering or injustices that are caused by or take place within a public space or institution. Sometimes, a shared sense of identity is built within factions coalescing around divides related to belief, purposes, or aims of schooling. Sometimes, a sense of identity develops in movements *against* public things, too. The point here is that public things are the object of attention, investment, and conflict. These public things, created through public work and our psychic investments in the things created through that work, are the condition for democratic sovereignty.

In the cultural moment of DeVos's nomination, I believe that public schooling for some citizens was re-imagined, re-remembered, or realized as a valuable institution, a public thing of (perhaps unlikely) permanence and emotional attachment. This attachment, expressed through activism against the nomination and fed by conversations, meetings, and social media connections created in the #TrumpResistance movement, formed a diverse "we" of unified voices joining forces for a battle against the DeVos appointment. Honig draws on Rousseau in describing how citizens attempt to rework democracy even as we can never do so completely or thoroughly:

[P]ublic things ... have the power to (re)enchant, to interpellate us as a(n often fractious) public in relation to their public thingness and, thus, to break the grip of a seemingly intractable paradox so we can rework it, rather than think we have to escape it, knowing we can only fail in the latter effort since the paradox is inescapable. (2017, p. 28)

DeVos was, of course, successfully appointed to her post. Agonist understandings of democracy remind us we cannot escape the paradox of conflict and exclusions; we can only keep trying to re-work our institutions. The loss of this battle by such a tight margin emphasized the power of the opposition, but confirmed Bracey's assertion that there is indeed a genuine, unabashed war on public schools in the United States. This war is now entering a new phase of engagement, requiring a reworking of public things and our capacity to maintain and build upon them. There is thus no time like the present to

¹ In my own work as an advocate for the possibilities of public education, I have been accused of employing fantasy in the sense of a delusional belief (Merry & New, 2016; Knight Abowitz, 2016), but Honig explains perfectly how affective relations with school as a public thing can be used towards passionate advocacy of public education and for more inclusive and enlightening public schools.

familiarize ourselves with agonist theory and what it can bring to school governance debates and questions.

Publics for Public Schools, and the Limitations of Agonism

Public schools need publics; they need (loosely) organized groups of citizens invested in them as *public things* of value and shared identity. Agonist critiques help to explain how democratic, nonviolent notions of conflict can bring energy surging into the creation of publics for public schools. Public schools, as public things, are re-constituted by citizens working through social change and problem-solving, but publics are difficult to bring into existence due to citizen apathy and lack of political, social and historical knowledge, including the embodied and habitual knowledge of public work. Habits of public creation include communication, or building a sense of the “we,” trusting others in shared forms of leadership and knowledge-building, empowering others as publics build capacity to make change, and transcending individualistic frames of knowledge and action (Knight Abowitz, 2014). All these habits require tremendous energy and psychic investment; public creation is long-odds business. Hegemony is no joke.

Agonism helps us recognize and face the conflicts that have been and always will be central to pluralist democratic states, and particularly those states in which late capitalism is thoroughly entrenched. These conflicts are not always nor necessarily unhealthy democratic strife but can be robust expressions of democratic energy channeled into public formation to preserve and reconstruct public things that continue to nurture its citizens, or destroy those public things that are irreparable or no longer serve us.

But by itself, agonist analysis of democratic governance will not help us reconstruct public schools or other public things of collective value. Many factors constitute a functional democracy: multiple forms of solidarity among diverse groups, a healthy economy for lower and middle classes, improving material well-being and security for poor and working-class citizens, among others. Agonist critiques explore the ways that conflict is an unavoidable path to these achievements, but conflict alone does nothing in and of itself. Conflict and exclusions must create, be capable of generating something new out of the ashes. Not all conflict does this; Boyte (2017) critiques “Manichean” views of conflict that he sees in much of politics today. Boyte says that the community organizing tool of “the canvass,” the means for building mass mobilizations in historic campaigns for civil and worker rights, is fueled by this polarizing view of politics. According to Boyte,

the Manichean model of the canvass polarizes civic life and erodes our common citizenship, communicating politics as warfare. It has also spread far beyond the canvass, including robo-calls, internet mobilizations, television ads, documentaries in the vein of Michael Moore, and the “axis of evil” framework used by Karl Rove in the aftermath of 9-11. The approach, in other words, is used by both right and left. As Elizabeth Williamson described in the *Wall Street Journal*, Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*, a classic primer for Manichean politics, is used by Tea Party activists as well as progressives. (para. 10)

Some forms of agonism can wind up fetishizing oppositional conflicts by solidifying identities of opposition into permanent *us versus them* framings absent the kind of public work and habits of public creation that bring people into meaningful shared projects focused on preserving, re-constituting, or creating new public things. How does agonism resist Manicheanism? The answer to this is the distinction

in agonist theory between antagonists and agonists. Agonist conflicts are between political adversaries who are temporary foes commanding respect (at best) and nonviolent responses (at the least), persons who share some democratic (or other) shared commitments. Antagonist conflicts are Manichean, between enemies. They develop habits of warfare that dehumanize and destroy channels of potential communication and compromise. Agonistic conflicts develop through various social groups that establish a sense of “we” or organized collective energies directed at a political goal of democratic worth, and in opposition to those positions, policies, groups or persons who represent a different goal representing perhaps a different notion of democracy. Agonistic conflict shouldn’t dehumanize, and should not resort to violence. These defy the “rules” of the agonist sense of political conflict. For certain, there is a fine line at work here. Agonist theorist William Connolly suggests we cultivate two essential virtues for this type of political engagement: agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Wenman 2008). These virtues are expressed by citizens understanding an intersubjective recognition of shared, interdependent humanity common to civic adversary and friend alike.

These virtues reflect some semblance of the relational politics that remains an important part of a functional democratic ethos, wherein passionate engagement is normed as positive and even patriotic. Peter Levine describes relational politics as “interactions among people who make decisions or take collective actions knowing something about one another’s ideas, preferences, and interests” (2014, para. 9). It is an interactive politics; it need not be in-person or face-to-face, though it may well benefit from flesh-and-blood encounters. Nor does relational politics depend on or seek to produce unity; ongoing compromises of position are likely the best it has to offer. Relational political encounters situate persons in relation to each other in some loose and open-ended way, and the local and state domain of some school policy-making helps increase possibilities for this work. How can educators and educational policy-makers pursue relational politics in widely diverse settings and contexts? Relational politics can reveal the humanity of our adversary; my adversary’s stories might reveal to me why she believes what she believes about education, no matter how strongly I may disagree with her. Education and school policy-making can be highly relational work, particularly at local levels, in which give-and-take with teachers, parents, students, citizens and scholars might produce rich and diverse outcomes. We have not seen this kind of policy-making at the federal or many state levels in decades, but at the local levels this kind of policy-making is far more typical, and much easier to orchestrate and carry out. (This is one of the most important arguments for continuing to maintain relatively local control of public schools.) At the federal and state levels, we might make more relational political moves by seeking out more audiences and interactions with elected officials. Organizations might vigorously pursue exchanges between members and those who are shaping educational policy.

Seeking relational politics around education might bring us to appreciate school as a *public thing* worth preserving and continually reconstructing. But relational politics alone cannot do this work; by itself it cannot thwart the looming DeVos agenda of increasingly privatized schools. Relational politics are not an “answer” or a solution to agonism; *both* are necessary for educational politics today, representing a fusion of approaches required to intervene in today’s “war on public schools.” Agonist formations of citizen dissent and resistance reveal the tremendous energy of engagement that is unleashed when citizens are activated by public things under threat. This energy is absolutely essential to win the war over public education, even as it may be insufficient for the task. But it is fuel for public creation, and public creation is what we need for public education’s future. The rise of agonist conflicts in education will create new challenges for public leaders and school leaders who will need to harness these energies into productive

contexts for policy-making. The rise of agonist conflicts in our era may also reshape the future of public schools in productive ways.

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