Chapter 5
The Dying of the Light: The Cause to Illuminate in this State of Fragile Democracy

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ABSTRACT

These are dangerous times (Giroux, 2010, 2015). In this chapter, the author illuminates and explores the founders’ complex and often contradictory perspectives on public education and democracy itself and their relevance to technologically-mediated educational discourses. This chapter demonstrates the importance of re-politicizing and historicizing public education with particular emphasis on defending public schools, public school teachers and the very concept of public education as a site of democratic solidarity. The author approaches this topic with attention to the corporatized war on education waged by wayward conservatives and centrist democrats. The author explores these battle lines while juxtaposing their stance and value for public education with that of the nation’s founders. The author expands upon this contrast by drawing critical awareness to the social, political, and cultural implications of information technology and the use of digital spaces to project our voices and faces loudly and vividly into the bedrooms of people never met.

INTRODUCTION

To illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large. (Thomas Jefferson, 1778)

The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one-mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves. (John Adams, 1785)

Bill O’Reilly is right about our founding fathers: their words are significant. This statement, however, is as far as the commentator’s revisionist perspective can travel. When it comes to the contemporary war

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on public education, the words of our early leaders, in all their complexity and contradiction, are vital in the ongoing attempt to protect and support our continually developing democracy and the very concept of public good. But, if we in the modern era are to honor their philosophy and ideology with respect to schooling, we must study their words, not distort them. We must consider their ideals, not divorce them from their meaning. We must adopt their appreciation of critical thinking while carefully focusing on the many ways we continue to confront the challenge of educating the American public. We must not conflate activism with a false sense of patriotism. In terms of the corporate media and politicians of the right wing, we must resist attempts to hijack the writings of the men responsible for the birth of our nation. We must resist attempts to use their professed values to support neoliberalism and the neoliberal agenda. Importantly, as public intellectuals in the spirit of Chomsky (1967) and as described by Robin (2016), we teachers must embody a pedagogy that takes responsibility for engaging in critical dialogues about the contested histories, philosophies, and purposes of public education in its profoundly noble and democratic mission.

These are dangerous times (Giroux, 2010, 2015). The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate and further explore the founders’ complex and often contradictory perspectives on public education and democracy itself and their relevance to contemporary technologically-mediated educational discourses. This chapter therefore demonstrates the importance of re-politicizing and historicizing public education with particular emphasis on defending public schools, public school teachers and the very concept of public education as a site of democratic solidarity. I approach this topic with attention to the corporatized war on education waged by wayward conservatives and centrist democrats. I explore these battle lines while juxtaposing their stance and value for public education with that of the nation’s founders. I expand upon this contrast by drawing critical awareness to the social, political, and cultural implications of information technology and the use of digital spaces to project our voices and faces loudly and vividly into the bedrooms of people we have never met. This expansion is made with reference to a digital age where school children and adults alike are allowed to protect or pitch their ideals, values, and concerns (whether subversive or quotidian) with the click of a button.

In this chapter, I voice my particular concern for this pitching in light of the fact that digital technologies are utilized by politicians, entertainers, celebrities, bullies and incendiaries, increasingly, to “empower the strong and disempower the weak” (Morozov, 2011, p. xvii). I have written this chapter as a counter-narrative seeking to draw attention to the historic conflict over the purposes and the continued importance of public schools, which are predicated on the principle of democratic solidarity and a commitment to create and sustain its vital public institutions. In light of our role as public intellectuals, teachers must embody our professional obligation to support all children through the evolving journeys upon which democracy depends. In this digital age we must remind ourselves that education is about re-imagining and/or re-creating a new and better way of life, not replicating tradition or sliding back toward what once was. The contemporary embrace of a neoliberal anti-public discourse has encouraged this backward slide and been disastrous to American public K-12 education and many other aspects of public life. In the context of emancipatory democracy (Friere, 2009), educators must cultivate in their students the critical consciousness that will, as Jefferson wrote, “illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large” (in Labaree, 2010, p. 50). This is the purpose of education in a continually aspiring democracy.