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 juxtapos-
ing 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 corpora-
tized 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 tech-
nologies 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 contin-
ued 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.