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A PASSION FOR DIVERSITY

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Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2008). *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools: The Power of Pluralism*. Teachers College Press, New York and London

This is a philosophical study where Thayer-Bacon shows us how tangible, exciting realities and abstract, less exciting theories inform each other to help transform public school into a place where students are treated as future citizens and change the way we think of “others.” Toward the end of the book, Thayer-Bacon concludes that the very idea of democracy is “inclusive and welcoming of others who are not like us” (p. 178). This is indeed what she has done – and she has done it elegantly.

Thayer-Bacon starts the book by tracing the roots of liberal democracy back to Locke and Rousseau’s classical liberalism and explores the underlying assumptions of their theories. Then, she moves on to look into current philosophical democratic theories represented by J. Dewey, B. Barber, I. M. Young, and Laclau and Mouffe in an effort to show that while these scholars have insightfully identified the problems of liberalism for us, classical liberalism still influences their recommendations. Following Dewey’s theory of social transaction, Thayer-Bacon points to a pluralistic relational direction that, she believes, will help Euro-Westerners move beyond their embeddedness within a liberal atomistic culture in search of democracy. Chapters 2 through 6 focus on five different themes illustrated through five collective cultures represented by Mexico, West Africa (Ghana), Native America, Japan and mainland China. Thayer-Bacon starts each theme chapter with stories from her field observations and then analyzes the themes in terms of what they represent for a relational, pluralistic democratic theory. The last chapter is a summary conversation on educational prac-

tice, where she offers reviews, criticisms, reflections, recommendations, passions for diversity that address issues of power, unequal material distribution, rationalism, individualism, universalism and naive relativism – in brief, a transactional democratic theory – and hope, for all of us, for a non-exclusionary world that is free from oppression as Young (1990) seeks in her idea of democracy.

Thayer-Bacon is up front about her classroom practice in the United States that reminds her of a reality: the philosophical foundation of U.S. democracy has its roots in “the Euro-Western classical liberal theory of Locke (1632-1704) and Rousseau (1712-1778)” (p. 1). Why does this reality deserve notice? Her answer is:

Great changes have occurred in political philosophy and in societies at large since Locke and Rousseau were writing. We live in times that Nancy Fraser (1997) describes as “postsocialist.” Today, key underlying assumptions of liberal democratic theory are being questioned and dismissed. (p. 2).

Her goal is plain while the task is demanding: develop “a relational, pluralistic social political theory” that moves beyond liberal democracy. Although giving lots of credit to Dewey’s powerful criticisms of classical liberalism that prepare us to examine atomistic individualism/culture with a sharp, critical eye, Thayer-Bacon is afraid that Dewey still cannot let himself out of the trap of rationalism and universalism due to his romantic view of agrarian U.S. society and face-to-face small town meetings and his naive view of science in search of democracy.

The five cultures, Mexican, West-African (Ghanaian), Native American, Japanese and Chinese, Thayer-Bacon includes in this study have experienced different levels of bias under the standards adopted by white, male, middle class and able-bodied Euro-Westerners and have suffered from serious racism for many years. Another significant attribute shared by these five cultures is their collective focus in raising children, which is incompatible with the individualistic values upon which U.S. democracy depends. Many of the students coming from these cultures struggle in schools “for the feelings of subtraction and loss of their cultural values,” although Asian Americans have been “stereotyped as ‘model minorities’ who are assumed to be very successful in U.S. schools” (p. 177, 5). In order to move beyond her own cultural limitations to address the problems of the liberal view of democracy, Thayer-Bacon uses a

phenomenological approach, tuning herself into these five cultures, observing the daily practices of the administrators, teachers and students in schools. Through this seven-year-long study, which has taken her to 23 US schools and four other countries, she has gained a deepened understanding of “what a relational, pluralistic democracy-always-in-the-making might look like,” in which “shared responsibility, shared authority, and shared identity” shape the heart (p. 176).

This is not my first time reading this book. Like many other times, I curl up in the California sunshine with this book, and then, I cannot stop reading. The sunshine heats up the winter, as the book warms up my day.

This book is refreshing. Thayer-Bacon takes on one of the tougher issues: does the liberal individualistic view of democracy constitute universal values? Her acceptance of differences and advocacy of diversity prompt her to explore values of other cultures to address the false assumptions of classical liberal democracy. She brings the cultures with a collective focus and those with individual-focused classical liberalism into a conversation in terms of schooling. So her answer to that question is loud and clear: no, that is not the case. The real sense of democracy, for Thayer-Bacon, means inclusion not exclusion. As Dewey (1973) points out, “democracy means education; it is itself, a process of continuing education of all the people” (p. 180). Exposing the problems of liberal democracy, Thayer-Bacon shows us collective cultures that emphasize *shared responsibility*, *shared authority*, and *shared identity* have a lot to offer for the ideal of democracy, which is neither individualistic nor collective. According to Thayer-Bacon, we can always learn from others, even those who are different from us. This is a nice practice of her “both/and logic.” As a Chinese growing up in a culture with a collective focus, I feel confused, disappointed and offended every time people ask me if mainland China is an authoritarian country or how far away China is from a democracy. I cannot help but wonder: what these people meant by democracy, how they came to form this wrong impression of China, and if the classical liberalism-based democracy is the only alternative to the current system in China. I cannot agree more with Thayer-Bacon that obviously “[t] here is no middle ground for coexistence and cooperation from a Euro-Western perspective; the only option is to abandon your culture and assimilate to ours. Our way is the right way, the true way,

and your way is primitive, savage, and backward, and full of myths and legends” (p. 105). Her praxis in this study has proved that collective values (including but not limited to Chinese) contribute to a democracy that is relational and pluralistic, and also applicable to a country that is as culturally diverse as the United States. With her openness and sharpness, Thayer-Bacon helps me see the limitations of U.S. democracy and gain a better perspective on my own cultural values and norms. More importantly, she makes me feel included, welcomed, and valued in the use of the pronoun “we,” as a member of the world village.

This book models a good practice of critical multicultural/democratic education. First of all, Thayer-Bacon informs that multiculturalism is not just about the celebration of human commonalities, but also our differences, which can push us apart or bring us closer. It depends on how people approach differences and commonalities. She starts with a relational view of human society as she describes in her early work *Relational “(e)pistemologies”* (2003). Then, she strives herself to be humble and generous as much as she can in understanding other cultures, while she does a lot of reflective work on her own culture and makes self-criticisms. How does she do it? She uses what she calls “caring reasoning” to help her. She models this practice everywhere in the book, which “insists that the researcher attend to the other culture before one moves to critique. This is the only way one can have a chance of gaining deeper knowledge of the other culture, as well as of one’s own” (p. 118). This is not an easy job. When the whole environment changes from the one the researcher is used to and feels comfortable with to one that is strange and maybe less comfortable, it’s hard for her/him to keep her/his thinking objective and positive as s/he tries to. Plus, outside researchers are always put in a vulnerable position for their cultural limitations, which are also called biases (Hatch, 2002). I think Thayer-Bacon does a fabulous job positioning herself both as a learner and a researcher with her deep respect and appreciation for the people in the schools she visits. Her humbleness and enthusiasm help her open up a door to the world of Native American people (p. 83). She reminds me of Dewey’s (1916/1944) elaboration on “education and communication”

Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common ... Not only is social life

identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. (p. 4-5).

This is what I describe as “sympathetic thinking” (Peng, 2007). Thayer-Bacon shares her feeling with those students disenfranchised in U.S. schools, for their pain from the conflicts of having different cultural values, being marginalized, and losing their bond to their mother cultures; she shares Native American teachers’ anger when they question why Native American science disappears from public education system; she also shares China’s deep concern for their huge population and appreciates their strong commitment to zero population growth since 1979. More importantly, when she points out the homogeneity existing in Japanese culture, her tone is gentle and her attitude is tolerant. Although she dislikes the sameness of classrooms and curriculum in China’s schools, she shows her receptivity and generosity in understanding China’s homogeneity, explaining: “[i]n China, the valuing of pluralism is not such an important issue because the culture is much less diverse than in the United States (although there are more than 50 [minority] ethnic groups in China)” (p. 151). Without any sense of superiority and arrogance and by putting herself in somebody else’s position and feeling for others, Thayer-Bacon successfully makes herself connected to other cultures and accepted by them as a humble and trustworthy scholar.

As a humble scholar, Thayer-Bacon also shows her deep understanding of her own country and culture, because she is able to reflect on the values Americans are obsessed with and offer sharp criticisms of her native culture. In the last chapter of the book, after questioning a paternalistic government that does not treat its citizens, particularly those who are in need, with dignity and respect or as equals, Thayer-Bacon goes further to speak of her deep concern for the US government’s hegemonic power over developing countries. She is worried about America’s “selfish greed” which makes this country “distrusted and despised;” she wants her fellow Americans to be aware of their “unfathomable arrogance in believing we deserve what we have (the myth of merit), and face the fact that “our wealth has come from the exploitation of others less powerful” (p. 160). Her integrity and powerful criticism

deserve admiration from those underprivileged people who work very hard to reach their American dreams. She critiques American individualism which has led Americans to a misguided conviction that, "smaller class size is important to make sure each child's individual needs are met by the teacher and that the child is not lost in a crowd of children" (p. 135). She is worried that when focusing on individual rights and needs, young children lose their opportunity to develop relational, communication skills and deep friendships with their classmates.

While challenging Americans' belief in small class size, Thayer-Bacon proposes an alternative that "large schools and classes can compensate for their size in a very simple way by keeping children together in the same class for several years" (p. 163). When children spend more time working and living with one another, they get to know one another at a deep level; more importantly, Thayer-Bacon further explains that in a large class, "Children are encouraged to work together and help one another in numerous ways, and this emphasis on interdependence is linked to a concept of citizenship that is more social and community-minded" (p. 142). In other words, Thayer-Bacon informs the reader that children can be taught how to be citizens "through a model that values friendship and through rituals that bind them together" (p. 142). She encourages her fellow Americans to "think of social group in terms of 'friendship,' which is practiced in Chinese culture" (p. 141). In doing so, others are no longer treated as hindrances standing in the way of individuals. Considering the present nation-wide severe recession and the California budget crisis, Thayer-Bacon's recommendation offers a nice solution to the departments of education that are facing budget cuts. Lately, I have been watching lots of interviews on TV, where teachers and parents complain about school budget cuts that will increase student numbers in both schools and classrooms. Every time I listen to these interviews, I hear the fear of large schools and classes and am reminded of Thayer-Bacon's concern. I share her recommendation to step back and "think of social group in terms of 'friendship.' More importantly, a very simple structural design – large classes where children are kept together for several years – as Thayer-Bacon claims, "supports at a deep psychological level a feeling of belonging and togetherness" (p. 135).

I think Thayer-Bacon has done a fabulous job in challenging classical liberal values and individualism in a world where people

are afraid of losing their freedom, privacy, and autonomy. She impresses me with her methodology in seeking to resolve philosophical problems and her enthusiasm, humility and generosity in conducting this study. However, there are still potential problems in this book I would like to share with the reader.

At the beginning of the book, Thayer-Bacon argues that Dewey (1935) is vulnerable to criticism in that he continues to focus on individual freedom and autonomy. I understand she uses the word "vulnerable," but still, she seems too harsh and does not give credit to Dewey's other works that address the problems of the terms "freedom" and "autonomy" when people refer to them. As we know, individual freedom and autonomy valued by the classical liberals are focused on a negative view of freedom, individual rights as natural rights, and individual primacy over the state. If Dewey's theory starts with the assumptions or supports, in one or more ways a "natural" view of human rights and individual/social dichotomy, for instance, then Thayer-Bacon has made her point well. However, later in her detailed analysis of Dewey's theory, she doesn't show us how Dewey's democratic theory has a focus on individual freedom and autonomy, but reminds us that Dewey does not start with an atomistic assumption of individualism, agreeing that he offers a "description of the individual as not starting out in a state of nature prior to entering a social state" (p. 10). For Dewey, human beings are relational and live in a "transactional" relationship (p. 9). Even though Dewey assumes rationalism in his view of science, it doesn't necessarily make his theory vulnerable to the charge of individual autonomy. As for "individual freedom," in many of his other works, Dewey tells us that his freedom with a focus on individual intelligence means being free to the maximum opportunity to realize one's full potential as a member of the community (Peng, 2007). This view of freedom is neither negative nor ignores individuals' social commitment.

The other minor problem is an answer I look for in this book. Thayer-Bacon starts her study with two research questions: why do Native American, Mexican American, and African American students have high drop-out rates and low proficiency exam scores, and why do Chinese American and Japanese American students who also come from a collective cultural background succeed in U.S. schools? I think we have a pretty clear answer for the first one from Thayer-Bacon's elaboration of the conflicting cultural values

these students encounter and their struggles, which make it hard for these students to succeed. Yet, for the second one, her answer is hard to find, even in the two chapters that talk about Japanese and Chinese values and classroom practices. I do find one answer in the first chapter. Right after she proposes the question of why Asian American and Jewish American students succeed, Thayer-Bacon says: "I suspected that closer agreement and comfort with individualism correlates with higher success rates, but this was something I wanted to explore further" (p. 5). However, the further exploration of this question does not seem to be included in the following chapters. I think an explicit discussion of this question will not only meet the reader's curiosity, but also help to support the researcher's commitment to diversity and pluralism in a way that collective values can also contribute to students' success in schools.

This is an enjoyable and rewarding reading experience! Thayer-Bacon's argument is compelling and thought-provoking over all. Certainly, no one writes to show flaws in his or her argument, but we are fallible human beings. That is why we need one another to form a community, and that is why Thayer-Bacon commits herself to a relational, pluralistic view of democracy. Her passion for diversity is based on a differentiated politics of difference and making the case for humility, flexibility, and openness to various possibilities, for tolerances and acceptance, even celebration. From this passion, I discover Thayer-Bacon shares Confucius's wisdom from 2500 years ago: "Walking in a company of three, I will surely find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly" (*Analects*, 7.22).¹

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1. This is my translation. The Chinese reference to the *Analects* is taken from Zhang (1990).

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