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Restoring The Public In Public Policy: Lessons from Lasch, Arendt, and Rawls

Anthony M. Barr

Pepperdine University, bookworm.barr5@gmail.com

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Introduction: What Does Equality Mean to Nice White Parents?

The School for International Studies (SIS) is an innovative public school in Brooklyn, New York. In 2015, most SIS students were drawn from poor or working-class Black, Latino, and Middle Eastern families. However, in the last few years, white parents with liberal values have begun sending their children to this school out of a well-intentioned rejection of the de facto segregation in the schools their children previously unattended. The recent New York Times podcast "Nice White Parents" picks up the story from there, detailing the controversies that emerged almost immediately.¹

In the very first episode of the podcast, one of the white fathers, Rob Hansen, grows frustrated with the inefficiencies of the PTA and its lack of fundraising prowess, and he decides to draw on his professional background and networks to create a foundation to solicit donor money. As it happens, Rob and several of the other white families want their kids to learn French (not, we gather, because of any ethnic ties to France), and they decide that the foundation should focus its fundraising specifically on building a French language program at the school. While this program is open to all students, the PTA is frustrated because they recognize it is an initiative explicitly catering to the desires of the white parents who want their children to have an advantage in college applications. In addition, many of the parents argue that the money being raised should go toward updating school infrastructure or other aims that more directly benefit everyone.

I am guessing that regardless of what one thinks about SIS's situation, no one feels indifferent when hearing this story. But let me see if I can be more precise in my estimation at how the various reactions correlate with political views. Let's start with the assumption that, generally speaking, while the political Right (especially in its most libertarian forms) would likely argue that there is no problem at all, the political Left is united in seeing this as a problem. Let me further speculate that the Left is divided on what exactly the primary problem is and how best to address it.

In contemporary explorations of equity, we can understand the Left's framing of justice issues in terms of the late political theorist John Rawls' foundational works on justice. In our post-Rawlsian context, the Left typically frames justice issues in terms of equality of opportunity or equality of outcome.²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>

² Rawls is a compelling figure in my argument because he does not fit squarely within either conception. Indeed he furnishes explicit arguments against both conceptions - arguing that neither can fully overcome the issue of natural and social contingency. Nevertheless, his difference

We might imagine the opportunity theorists identifying the school's problem as inequity as it pertains to which students access which material resources. Framed in this way, the obvious solution is to redistribute the money coming in from the foundation in a manner that more obviously benefits all the students equally. On the other hand, the outcome theorists say the problem is simply that some students gain an edge over the other students through the specialized French course, and the solution is thus to either continually increase the number of students taking French or to abolish the class altogether.

I begin this essay on public policy considering this podcast because the issues at this school are a microcosm of today's most passionate debates, particularly within the Left. At risk of painting with too broad a brush, let's say that today's neoliberals focus on outcomes, advocating for affirmative action and quotas as a way of reassuring themselves that so long as a steady handful of intelligent students from underprivileged backgrounds are joining the ranks of the elite then justice is being served overall.³ On the other hand, social democrats (defined here as proponents of expansive social welfare within the broader capitalist structure) and socialists instead insist on better redistributions of material resources, particularly since they are focused less on racial barriers and more focused on class warfare.

The crux of my argument in this paper requires a rejection of the idea that either framework, equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, serves as a good starting place for defining the problem central to the school or seeking to address that problem. And just as the case study opens into a larger consideration of public policy debates, my argument also takes a wide view of present affairs. I will argue that the primary problem facing the school and American society more broadly is the artificial narrowing of who constitutes the public and the exclusion of those who lack technocratic expertise from the democratic process. I will then argue for a robust view of citizenship that advocates for widespread participation in public affairs.

The Critique of Neoliberal Meritocracy:

To begin, let us leave the school for now, and think critically about the neoliberal opportunity theorists. These theorists are concerned primarily with consistent and

principle articulated crudely as a rising tide lifting all boats is focused on outcomes and so I tentatively group him with the outcome theorists with plenty of important caveats. (See pgs. 71-80.)

³ More broadly, this view is focused on social mobility as the primary measure of progress.

sufficient mobility as the metric for establishing equality.⁴ In this regard, these theorists adopt a variation of Rawls' difference principle inasmuch as it is understood by these theorists that a situation with both inequality and the accessible promise of mobility into a better life is preferable to an equality of situation wherein everyone's situation is of a decidedly lower quality of life.⁵ Nevertheless, Rawls parts ways with opportunity theorists in establishing as a further condition that the advantages drawn by those with greater success are justifiable only if the socially advantaged improve the quality of life of those not advantaged beyond what it would be if everyone had an equal situation. In other words, Rawls insists that the rising tide must lift all boats, while the opportunity theorists merely insist that there be steady mobility into the rising boats by those who are otherwise sinking.⁶ This careful distinction separates the ideal Rawlsian society from the meritocracy we currently inhabit, which Rawls severely critiques.

Rawls positions meritocracy as a social order that "uses equality of opportunity as a way of releasing men's energies in the pursuit of economic prosperity and political dominion."⁷ In this order, "there exists a marked disparity between the upper and lower classes in both means of life and the rights and privileges of organizational authority."⁸ Ultimately, in such a system, "the culture of the poorer strata is impoverished while that of the governing and technocratic elite is securely based on the service of the national ends of power and wealth."⁹ The crucial insight in all of this is that absent any corrective force, stark divides in outcomes will emerge which can threaten the preservation of the democratic state.

It is important to note that Rawls' critique is emphatically not purely materialistic. Instead, in his critique of the sharp social division between the meritocratic winners and losers, he writes that the losers are justified in their revolt against the elites not simply because they were excluded from the wealth and privilege attached to the elites' roles, but more fundamentally "because they were disbarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties," a deprivation of "one of the main forms of human good."¹⁰ The point to underscore here is that for Rawls, this widening inequality in opportunity inhibits the full realization of a just society.

⁴ After all, the alternative to this is a leveling of situations which ultimately represents the priorities of the outcome theorists.

⁵ For the main discussion of Rawls' difference principle, see pgs 75-83.

⁶ See especially pg. 80

⁷ Rawls, 106.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Rawls, 84.

While Rawls can get us started critiquing opportunity theorists and the meritocracy they produce, the late social theorist Christopher Lasch provides the visceral bite to this critique. Lasch has many indictments of the meritocratic elite. First, they tend to find success at the price of detaching from their community of origin: "from the professional and managerial point of view, neighborhoods are places in which the unenterprising are left behind - backwaters of failure and cultural stagnation."¹¹ Similarly to Rawls, Lasch recognizes that this kind of geographic sorting "drains talent away from the lower classes and thus deprives them of effective leadership" (not to mention access to much-needed capital.)¹² Second, this new "aristocracy of brains," given its lack of rootedness, produces aristocrats who give their allegiance to the flow of capital in global markets, "turning their back on the heartland and cultivating ties with the international market in the fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture."¹³ Third, in addition to being themselves unrooted, these elites actively participate in the uprooting of whatever city they happen to dwell in, remaking the city "as a place merely to work and play, not as a place to put down roots, to raise children, to live and die."¹⁴ Fourth, as a direct byproduct of this geographic concentration of the elites, positions of influence are also consolidated and have added barriers of entry as "the circles of power - finance, government, art, entertainment - overlap and become increasingly interchangeable."¹⁵ Fifth, and finally, the elites who have been taught that they are the deserving and valued members of society really do absorb this message and consequently learn to look down on everyone else: long before Hillary Clinton was dismissing half of America as a "basket of deplorables," Lasch was writing of the "the venomous hatred that lies not far beneath the smiling face of upper-middle-class benevolence."¹⁶

Lasch's scathing portrait of the meritocratic elite is the necessary foundation for understanding his diagnosis of the patterns of disinvestment and disrepair that mark the places and people abandoned in the meritocratic social Darwinist system. Notice then that in the substantive and evergreen passage I quote below, most neoliberals can certainly affirm the crisis that Lasch identifies. Still, they rarely can see how they are implicated in it, and they certainly cannot conceive of any lasting solutions to it. Lasch writes:

¹¹ Lasch, 134.

¹² Ibid, 44.

¹³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, 135.

¹⁵ Ibid, 18.

¹⁶ Ibid, 28.

The same pattern of development has been repeated in one city after another, with the same discouraging results. The flight of population to the suburbs, followed by the flight of industry and jobs, has left our cities destitute. As the tax base shrivels, public services and civic amenities disappear. Attempts to revive the city by constructing convention centers and sports facilities designed to attract tourists merely heighten the contrast between wealth and poverty. The city becomes a bazaar, but the luxuries on display in its exclusive boutiques, hotels, and restaurants are beyond the reach of most of the residents.¹⁷

As with Rawls, Lasch's objection to meritocracy is not merely materialistic. Instead, he too is concerned with the effects of meritocracy on the democratic ideal. For example, even in the description of the effects of neoliberal policy quoted above, Lasch is not concerned primarily with income disparity as much as he is concerned that the end product is the loss of civic participation as abandoned communities are drained of resources for civic life on the one hand, and elite cities are transformed into "a sprawling amorphous conglomeration without clearly identifiable boundaries, public space, or civic identity, "on the other."¹⁸ Similarly, Lasch is concerned with how the talent siphoning and power consolidation inherent to meritocracy undermine the democratic ideal of each citizen as an active participant in public affairs - together forming the public in public policy. It is again worth quoting Lasch at length on this point:

Civic life requires settings in which people meet as equals, without regard to race, class, national origins. Thanks to the decay of civic institutions ranging from political parties to public parks and informal meeting places, conversation has become almost as specialized as the production of knowledge.¹⁹

In this portion of his argument, Lasch levies what is perhaps the best critique of Rawls, namely that regardless of how deeply Rawls himself is allergic to meritocracy, the Rawlsian rational actor has no real reason to share this allergy given that he has no necessary social ties or obligations beyond the duty not to impede others in the pursuit of their own happiness. In Lasch's description, Rawls' liberalism "conceives of human beings as rootless abstractions wholly absorbed in maximizing their own advantage," and within that system, there is "no room for affective ties except in their most abstract form," (one loves humanity but not his

¹⁷ Ibid, 8.

¹⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid, 117.

neighbor.)²⁰ Why should I, the Rawlsian actor, be forced to bump up against others in civic life in circumstances and settings not of my choosing and liking? And why should I share the bounties of my privilege as the difference principle bids me, with people with whom I have no ties? And indeed this is the exact view that Lasch finds explicitly advocated by Rawls' disciple Richard Rorty who writes in his own words of a civil society that looks like "a bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs," in which the only shared public forum is the marketplace, a society in which all other forms of engagement take place in the insularity of self-chosen enclaves.²¹

Thus, for all Rawls' insights, his central flaw is not recognizing that his ideal mode of liberalism, if it is to avoid becoming a meritocracy, fully depends on pre-liberal sources of political identity. But precisely because his project (and much of the neoliberal project) seeks to be self-sufficient without prescription of particular civic virtues, it cannot acknowledge its predicament. Thus to draw from the words of Lasch, "having abandoned the old republican ideal of citizenship along with the republican indictment of luxury," these opportunity theorists in the neoliberal mold lack "any grounds on which to appeal to individuals to subordinate private interest to the public good."²²

In short, the opportunity theorists' emphasis on mobility is myopic toward the widespread political and economic devastation wrought by meritocracy, and the neoliberal paradigm cannot exculpate itself from the pernicious consequences of meritocracy without admitting the insufficiencies of the Rawlsian position. When people are convinced that opportunity theory fails as a framework, they move quickly toward outcome theory. As we will see, this leads us directly to a ballooning administrative state that, however well it might lead to a more just distribution of resources (and this is of course arguable), merely exacerbates the political disenfranchisement of most citizens and further banishes much of the public from public policy.

The Critique of Liberal Welfare and The Administrative State:

²⁰ Ibid, 103.

²¹ Ibid, 128.

²² Ibid, 95. We might inquire as to whether liberalism is merely dependent on preliberal sources or whether it is parasitic in its feeding upon the very preliberal sources that have hitherto sustained it as theorists like Patrick Deneen maintain. Without wading into that debate, let me simply note that we do have distinctly American ideals of civic republicanism, not least of which is Winthrop's famous sermon A Model of Christian Charity which provided much of the theoretical foundation for Puritan civic life.

Unlike market-infatuated neoliberals, progressives call for an increase in government services and social safety nets funded by increased government redistribution of wealth through higher taxes levied on the wealthy. However, when pressed, few progressives can furnish evidence that the growing inflation of government-as-administrative-state produces tangible results in reducing poverty or healing the divisions (economic and social) created by the market efficiencies of meritocracy. The progressives must instead argue that none of the previous four or five or ten presidential administrations were daring enough, that if only we expand government even more, then all the problems Lasch has outlined will finally be resolved.

Lasch indicts the sliding goal posts that underpin this rhetoric, noting that "if the reform movement gave us a society that bears little resemblance to what was promised, we have to ask not whether the reform movement was insufficiently liberal and humanitarian but whether liberal humanitarianism provides the best recipe for a democratic society."²³ In lieu of convincingly answering Lasch's indictment, progressives are left to simply beg the question ad nauseum.

Nevertheless, let us assume for the sake of argument that the progressives are right that an ever-expanding centralized administrative state is what is required as the precondition for equality of outcome as the basis for a just society. We still need to think about what effects such a state has on democracy and the public's role in public affairs. Recall from the previous section that even Rawls—for as much as he does not wish to prescribe any particular normative way of life—sees democratic participation as a constitutive element of a fulfilled life, and not simply as a mechanism for ensuring material benefit but more fundamentally as a pathway to self-realization.

What is the effect of a growing administrative state on democratic participation? Lasch surveys the origins of administrative government in the reforms of 20th-century progressives like Woodrow Wilson who he sees as operating from the position that "government was a science, not an art."²⁴ For these pioneers of government expansion, Lasch notes that public debate is a distraction from the work of experts whose specialized education ensures they understand policy questions better than the average Joe.²⁵

²³ Lasch, 148.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 167.

²⁵ *ibid*.

As the work of shaping policy is handed over to credentialed economists and other social scientists, the role of the public becomes focused on the procedural rather than the substantive, choosing the decision-makers rather than making decisions. Lasch notes that the public, in this case, ordinary citizens in their capacity as citizens, become increasingly "content to leave government to the experts," on the condition that the experts satisfy their appetite for the "ever-increasing abundance of comforts and conveniences so closely identified with the American way of life."²⁶ Likewise, so long as their various metrics of success in equity and equality are met, opportunity and outcome theorists alike are content to let governance become the domain of an elite few.²⁷

Writing several decades before Lasch, Arendt anticipates his concerns while providing an even more extensive argument against the shift to technocracy. She, too, denounces as anti-democratic those modern bureaucratic states in which "all political questions in the welfare state are ultimately problems of administration, to be handled and decided by experts."²⁸ She further notes that not even the "experts" in this framework are genuine political actors engaged in statecraft. She writes, for example, that elected representatives lack "an authentic area of action," and are mere "administrative officers, whose business, though in the public interest, is not essentially different from the business of private management."²⁹

Arendt also identifies the sleight-of-hand in which citizens are taught to be content with procedural participation rather than deliberative, active, and substantive participation. She notes that we are increasingly left in a situation in which people only share in public power at the ballot box on election day, with ever

²⁶ Ibid, 169.

²⁷ I should note as an aside that in Lasch's view, The Right has no answer to this blossoming of the administrative state either. He writes biting that "...we have heard a good deal of talk about the repair of our material infrastructure, but our cultural infrastructure needs attention too," and he adds that this attention must be more than simply "the rhetorical attention of politicians who praise 'family values' while pursuing economic policies that undermine them" (pg. 100.) In typical rhetorical flourish, Lasch writes that "suburban shopping malls are no substitute for neighborhoods" and "market mechanisms will not repair the fabric of social trust." Arendt shares in this critique, particularly focusing on the errors of market fundamentalists. She writes, "when we were told that by freedom we understood free enterprise, we did very little to dispel this monstrous falsehood, and all too often we have acted as though we too believed that it was wealth and abundance which were at stake in the postwar conflict..." (209) She adds that economic growth can neither "lead into freedom or constitute a proof for its existence," a fact readily made apparent when one considers present-day China. Put simply, for both thinkers, the only contribution the Right seems to have to the problems of the administrative state is the inane proposal that it be replaced with an even larger globalized market, leading us right back to the neoliberal conundrums from which we came.

²⁸ Arendt, 264.

²⁹ *ibid.*

lessening "opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens."³⁰ She writes gloomily that "the most the citizen can be hoped for is to be 'represented', whereby it is obvious that the only thing which can be represented and delegated is interest, or the welfare of the constituents, but neither their actions nor their opinions."³¹ Indeed, it is worse than this, for while we might assume that citizens still retain their opinions, Arendt maintains that they in fact do not, because "opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate," and where no such public discussion exists, there are only political moods.³²

Careful attention to this line argument should give a resounding answer to the question regularly raised by the various consultants and strategists relied upon by the DNC, particularly in the face of campaign defeats, "why do the masses vote against their own interest?" Because even leaving unaddressed the assumption that these strategists are in the best position to define public interest, it never seems to occur to them that maybe Joe the Plumber wants to participate meaningfully in defining political problems and crafting political solutions particularly in his local community, rather than being spoon-fed policy proposals he had no say in by a faraway elite he knows looks down on him.³³ And to the extent that Joe and his neighbors are pushed out of this political work, they are naturally susceptible to the kinds of political moods that usher in demagogues that flatter them at exuberant rallies (themselves a form of political participation worth taking just as seriously as protests).

A Better Model, Equality of Participation:

Lasch puts matters bluntly: "democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state."³⁴ By "works best," we are not talking about metrics like market efficiency, but rather the citizenry's political health.

³⁰ Ibid, 245.

³¹ Arendt, 260.

³² *ibid.*

³³ I have in mind strategists like David Schor who had this to say in a recent NY Magazine interview: "if we can't reduce the structural biases that have appeared in the last ten years by changing the rules of the game [eg., statehood for DC, etc.], we will have to make the hard choice of changing our party so that we can appeal to these non-college-educated voters who are turning against us." The lack of subtext in this callous attitude is astonishing but the sentiment itself is commonplace. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/11/david-schor-analysis-2020-election-autopsy-democrats-polls.html?fbclid=IwAR2gmVwGufMGrRLdVx12e_2eyLbXlnjwRf5JroOiTYnFdwKcPga0PbCiE50

³⁴ Lasch, 7-8.

This is not a particularly new insight. As Arendt notes, for the ancient Greeks who invented democracy, freedom was something understood as being manifest in human action, that "could appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them."³⁵ Thus she notes that, contrary to Rawls' vision of the sovereign individual who defines his own goods, "the life of a free man needed the presence of others."³⁶ More specifically, she notes that "freedom itself needed...a place where people could come together - the agora, the marketplace, or the polis, the political space proper."³⁷

Arendt sees this understanding of freedom as central to America's founding. She writes that "Americans knew that public freedom consisted in having a share in public business and that the activities connected with this business by no means constituted a burden but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else."³⁸ As with the Greeks, this early American conception of public freedom is significantly exterior and bound to space and time; public happiness is what we enjoy together to a large extent through our shared political deliberation and political action in public spaces.³⁹

Arendt's central insight is that, unlike the French revolution which was mostly fixated on disparities of wealth as the defining problem of the age, for the American Founders, "the problem they posed was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government."⁴⁰ Put another way, rather than a social revolution premised on social mobility, America began as a political revolution premised on political participation.⁴¹

³⁵ Arendt, 21.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110; on this, Arendt is in direct agreement with Rawls.

³⁹ This, on the other hand, is directly contrary to Rorty's vision of freedom as what we enjoy in the privacy of our exclusive clubs. Sadly it is indeed Rorty's vision of freedom that Arendt sees as defining America today, a view in which freedom must now be "defended against the public and its power," and in where we now equate "the political with government" (128.)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58

⁴¹ The French position may seem, at first glance, the more compassionate, just as the progressives often assume they hold the moral high ground. But it is precisely the emphasis on political participation that leads Arendt to write so incisively that "the predicament of the poor after their self-preservation has been assured is that their lives are without consequence, and that they remain excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine..." (59.) The French Revolution, much like our own meritocracy fails miserably when we extend our analysis beyond mere material standing. As Arendt writes, "the 'elite sprung from the people' has replaced the pre-modern elites of birth and wealth; it has nowhere enabled the people qua the people to make their entrance into political life and to become participators in public affairs" (269.)

To briefly summarize all that has been hereto argued, no matter how dutifully we facilitate upward mobility as the opportunity theorists demand or redistribute resources as the outcome theorists demand, we will never ensure a thriving democracy. Instead, in keeping with the insights of the Greeks and American Founders, our focus needs to be on equality of participation as our benchmark. In this framework, we will, as Lasch writes, "defend democracy not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government," a form of political participation that "extends the circle of debate as widely as possible and thus forces all citizens to articulate their views, to put their views at risk, and to cultivate the virtues of eloquence, clarity of thought and expression, and sound judgment."⁴²

Conclusion: A Public Philosophy for the 21st Century

We are now ready to return to the nice white parents at the SIS school. My argument all along has been that neither the opportunity nor the outcome theorists are of direct help in analyzing the situation. Drawing from the three figures cited in this paper, however, I hope we can now see that the primary problem with the foundation set up by Hansen is that it bifurcates the school community, narrowing the scope of "the public" involved in the public process of democratically governing the school (including the notable task of selecting courses). We ought, therefore, to be critical of this action even if full equality of opportunity and outcome were achieved exclusively, or achieved with greater efficiency, through this means. Rather than circumventing the public as it is constituted by participating parents, teachers, students, and other key members of the community, Hansen should seek to work within the community as a whole in discussion and collaboration with his fellow citizens as together they chart a trajectory for the school.

Expanding outward, I have argued that neither the market nor the administrative state are adequate replacements for a politically engaged citizenry that deliberates together in public about public affairs and that acts together as an expression of public freedom. Let me turn one final time to Lasch:

A public philosophy for the twenty-first century will have to give more weight to the community than to the right of private decision. It will have to emphasize responsibilities rather than rights. It will have to find a better expression of the community than the welfare state. It will have to limit the

⁴² Lasch, 171.

scope of the market and the power of corporations without replacing them with a centralized state bureaucracy."⁴³

At the heart of Lasch' call for a public philosophy is the concept of the public. The question of how we can restore the public to public policy is perhaps the greatest question facing us as policy practitioners today. And so while I've written this to a professional audience, I do not wish for this discourse to be contained within the boundaries of the credentialed discipline. It is time to engage the fullest imaginable public directly in the discussion of public affairs which equally concerns each of us as citizens in our shared pursuit of public freedom.

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⁴³ *ibid*, 113.