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Introduction to the Suite: Political Education for Human Transformation

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Abstract

This short text introduces a first suite of papers selected from an East-West project funded jointly by the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). In an attempt to address the concrete social and educational issues that are faced in so many parts of the world, the project engages classic American philosophy (including transcendentalism, pragmatism, and the work of Stanley Cavell) in interdisciplinary exchange with Japanese thought (including the philosophy of the Kyoto School), feminist studies, and the ethics of care. In contemporary tragedies of exclusion, no less than in corresponding anxieties of inclusion, it finds a deepening crisis in democracy, and it suggests limitations in dominant conceptions of citizenship education as well as in the turn to therapy. It seeks to define the conditions for the generation of a politically mature citizenship within democracy recreated as an equality of voices. Political education thus comes to be understood as an education of one's experience, in which the humanities and the arts assume new prominence.

NAOKO SAITO and SANDRA LAUGIER

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been difficult to communicate face to face. People around the world have become distant in unprecedented ways, and cross-cultural exchange is in danger of stagnating. In these times, we need to sustain hope and exert our efforts in reaching beyond borders. It is in the spirit of such hope that the papers included in this suite have been published. They are the product of cross-cultural exchange between France and Japan supported by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). The overall aim of this exchange is to promote interdisciplinary research on moral and political education and collective enquiry into democracy as a form of life.

There are three features of our cross-cultural exchange whose spirit are echoed in this suite. First, Japanese, French and other researchers in philosophy, literary studies, comparative education, political studies and gender studies have contributed mutually inspiring, diverse perspectives. The theoretical backbone for the work is provided by classic American philosophy (including transcendentalism and pragmatism) in interdisciplinary exchange with Japanese thought (including the philosophy of the Kyoto School), feminist studies, and the ethics of care. Second, the research has attempted to combine theory and practice in addressing some of the concrete social and educational issues that Japan and Europe confront. Third, the project has adopted methods of reflective dialogue in which participants are engaged in mutual learning through cross-cultural perspectives. In this sense, this is itself an educational endeavour in which boundaries are crossed in mutual transformation.

The tragedies of exclusion that have been created by religious, ethnic, racial and political tensions around the world, and more recently by the pandemic, generate what we might call anxieties of inclusion and a deep crisis in democracy as a form of life—that is, in ways of

living in which people mutually attend to diverse voices and feel a commitment to democracy in the course of everyday life. At the same time, it suggests that contemporary educational resources do not function properly for the genuine cultivation of citizens. Citizenship education in its dominant form is geared towards skill and technical knowledge, the humanities in higher education lack practicality, and 'social education' becomes a kind of therapy. Each abides in its separate sector, aggravating processes of de-politicisation and failing to respond at a deeper level to the crisis of culture. Hence, it is today an urgent task for schools, higher education and society as a whole, in the East and in the West, to cultivate a politically mature citizenship for the recreation of democracy as equality of voices. Such maturity requires self-criticism, the exercise of the imagination, and openness to different others.

In order to respond to this task, we have explored the question whether there actually can be education for democracy and what its best means are. We have been searching for ways beyond the familiar narrow frameworks of citizenship education and the inadequacies of contemporary educational practice as a preparation for democracy. In particular, we have been exploring political education through the cultivation of the aesthetic imagination and the development of sensitivity to those living on the margins.

Within the curriculum, the space for dissent in aesthetic judgement models possibilities for political and moral life, and this is something on which practical decisions regarding methods of assessment and the conceptualization of criteria have a concrete bearing. We have been experimenting with curricula that cultivate moral sensibility and diversity and that bridge the aesthetic and the political, especially in the study of film and TV shows. We have also considered political education as a kind of linguistic education, based upon the art of translation, and as an education of one's experience. Furthermore, we have been examining the need to make the feminine voice heard (along the lines of an ethics of care informed by the work of Stanley Cavell) in exploring alternative emotions, experiences, and claims, and different styles of judgment.

In this first selection of papers, we include three papers that are indicative of the character and orientation of the project. Mickaëlle Provost's 'Undoing Whiteness: A Political Education of One's Experience', Anton Sevilla's 'Mori Akira's Education for Self-Awareness: Lessons from the Kyoto School for Mindful Education', and Sandra Laugier's 'Film as Moral Education'. We hope soon to publish further papers from this research endeavour.

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