



# Liberalism versus Democracy? Schooling Private Citizens in the Public Square

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## ***Liberalism Versus Democracy? Schooling Private Citizens in the Public Square***

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This article examines the conflict in political liberalism between the demands placed on education by liberalism and those placed on education by democracy. In so far as the principles of political liberalism entail both that the state not interfere with individuals' private commitments and that it ensure the maintenance of liberal democratic institutions, I suggest that it is rent by an internal tension that poses particular dilemmas for education. This tension is explored through three competing models of the school as a politically liberal institution, expressed in terms of a schematic analysis of three countries' approach to education: England, the United States and France. I argue that while all three countries capture important aspects of the politically liberal educational project, and while the American approach especially successfully and self-consciously addresses the balance between liberalism and democracy in constructing the school as a public square, no model in theory or in practice is able to meet the diverse and competing demands of political liberalism. In so far as any political system is viable only if it is able to maintain itself across generations, however, I conclude that political liberalism fails as a theory in at least one important respect, and that the problem of education thus deserves much deeper attention from liberal political theorists than it has yet enjoyed.

In this article, I examine potential conflicts in political liberalism between the demands placed on education by liberalism and those placed on education by democracy. In so far as the principles of political liberalism entail the maintenance of liberal democratic institutions, it is rent by an internal tension that poses particular dilemmas for education. The *liberal* dimension of political liberalism privileges the *private* component of individuals' lives, attempting to shield individuals as much as possible from interference by the state, government or other secondary associations. As a result, this liberal dimension both favours a strong public–private distinction, and attempts to place as much of people's lives as possible in the private domain so as to protect them from public interference. The *political* or *democratic* dimension of political liberalism, by contrast, is concerned with the *public* character of individuals'

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lives, as well as with individuals' obligations to preserve the institutions of public life. Recognizing the maintenance of liberal democratic institutions to be an essential prerequisite for the maintenance of political liberalism itself, the democratic element of political liberalism finds expression in its insistence that citizens come to identify with the political community and learn and demonstrate the civic virtues of toleration, mutual respect and critical reflection concerning the demands of public life.

It is the difficulties caused by attempting to accommodate this tension between liberalism and democracy in schools – and by extension, in society at large – that will be the focus of this article. The public–private distinction has admittedly been attacked already from numerous angles, and writers such as Amy Gutmann, Nomi Maya Stolzenberg and Stephen Macedo have discussed the problem specifically in regard to education.<sup>1</sup> Important *institutional* conundra raised by this tension have been ignored, however, in the attention paid to theory independent of specific educational practice. In particular, I believe it is worth exploring how school provision might actually be structured so as to minimize the tension between the principles of private non-interference on the one hand and public 'character-building' on the other. To this end, I will examine both the potential *curricular* demands imposed by political liberalism, and the *institutional* demands of structuring school provision so as to meet the democratic and liberal requirements of a plural society.

In exploring the possibilities of public school<sup>2</sup> provision for the private individual, I will present three competing visions of the school as a politically liberal institution, expressed in terms of a schematic representation of three countries' approach to education: England, the United States and France.<sup>3</sup> These competing structures of education, I will argue, reflect important differences of commitment to, and can profitably be distinguished on the basis of the relative weight given to, liberalism and democracy. If we think of these two elements as defining the endpoints of a politically liberal spectrum, England's approach to school provision will be represented as lying very near the public–private divide (and therefore relatively far from concerns about inculcating civic virtue),

<sup>1</sup> Amy Gutmann, 'Civic Education and Social Diversity', *Ethics*, 105 (1995), 557–79; Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, '“He Drew a Circle That Shut Me Out”: Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education', *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (1993), 581–667; Stephen Macedo, 'Liberal Civic Education and Religious Fundamentalism: The Case of God v. John Rawls?' *Ethics*, 105 (1995), 468–96.

<sup>2</sup> In the interests of emphasizing the role of the state school in establishing and maintaining the 'public square' and the public liberal democratic virtues, I choose to use the American term 'public' school in place of the British 'state' school to designate state-maintained schools.

<sup>3</sup> It is a bit misleading to refer to American school provision in national terms, as education is governed (and provided) almost entirely at the state level. Because the features of school provision that I want to examine, however, are fairly uniform across the country – both because constitutional restrictions such as the First Amendment place limits upon public school policy, and because larger states exercise significant indirect power over smaller states' education policy (through textbook selection, for example) – I will speak in this article as if the United States has an identifiable national educational policy.

with France at the other extreme, and the United States positioned somewhere in the middle.

The division between the demands of the political and the private will be seen to be linked to a second divide among political liberals – namely, the place of *pluralism* in public life (and therefore also in the life of the public school). In tandem with its privileging of the private over the public, England will be seen to pursue a policy of ‘divided pluralism’, in which pluralism is treated as a condition of private life to which public life and schooling must conform, but not as itself a public good. The United States, by contrast, will be seen to embrace individual pluralism as an intrinsic – and intrinsically desirable – feature of public life; France, under this analysis, will be seen to link its republican emphasis on the inculcation of a single national character to an explicit disavowal of pluralism as a public good. Thus, the article will follow through both sources of tension – the balance between private non-interference and public civic education, and the place of pluralism in a liberal society – in its attempt to set forth the institutional possibilities and practical conflicts latent within politically liberal education.

By focusing on the specific systems of educational provision represented by these three countries (as opposed to confining the analysis to a purely abstract level), I hope that we will come to understand better the possibilities and limitations of political liberalism in the civic and educational spheres. Theorizing about education conducted without reference to specific experiences of educational practice is problematic for two reasons. First, the nuances characteristic of relationships among ideas, practices, principles, etc., are often lost when they are considered in purely theoretical contexts. Empirical study can reveal tensions and subtleties of influence among ideas and practices that seem straightforward and unproblematic at the level of abstract theory. Secondly, reference to experience is useful because of the special link between the construction of national identity and the construction of education and the school. As I will try to demonstrate throughout the article, education cannot be abstracted from its national and local context. Working through politically and legislatively located empirical examples of educational institutions and approaches is thus the best means of coming to understand even in theory what a politically liberal education can achieve. Although there is no room to give further justification here, I hope that the article will itself provide a demonstration of this methodological assertion.

I should note, however, that theoretical rather than empirical questions ultimately drive this article, and thus direct the use to which the empirical material is put. In particular, I do not mean to claim that English, French or American education policies are or ever have been motivated by politically liberal concerns, nor that my characterizations of the possible outcomes of these policies always occur in practice. Rather, the descriptions that follow are intentionally simplified and schematized ‘ideal-type’ models of what are in practice extraordinarily complex sets of pragmatically institutional aims, motivations and practices. This is especially true in so far as these models are

limited to each country's *public education* policies. Private schools occupy a surprisingly privileged place in all three countries – France's funding of private Roman Catholic schools in spite of its fierce attachment to secular education being the most noteworthy example. Private schools thus end up playing a role in the society that can be sharply divergent from the state's primary educational stance.<sup>4</sup> Although the exclusion of private schooling from this discussion obviously reduces this article's descriptive validity and effectiveness as an empirical analysis of comparative educational practices, its omission is warranted, I believe, by considerations both of space and of theoretical clarity. In the end, while I do hope that the theoretical discussion will prove at least somewhat empirically illuminating, any insight gained into current education practice is welcome but secondary.

#### I. PRIVATIZING THE PUBLIC: THE ENGLISH MODEL

Political liberalism's 'claim to fame' is that it avowedly makes minimal demands on individual citizens, especially in the private arena of personal commitments. Citizens must exhibit such traits of character as will uphold and maintain the institutions of liberal democracy, and they must respect the rights and liberties of others. But they need not affirm any state-wide conception of what defines the good life or the good person. In so far as liberals measure legitimacy by the range of people who could reasonably support a particular set of political principles (under a variety of more and less artificial conditions), political liberalism's undemandingness, and careful protection of individuals' private lives from public intrusion, is what sets it apart as a desirable and viable political theory in the eyes of many theorists.<sup>5</sup> Extending this approach to the question of education, then, this characterization of political liberalism suggests that any publicly provided (or mandated) schooling should respect the private

<sup>4</sup> French and American policies in particular towards private schools are both historically and normatively at odds with their public educational commitments. It is only because on 24 June 1984 one million people marched in Paris against the suggested closure of Catholic schools, that they still exist at all; likewise, it is because public schools in the United States were anti-Catholic from their foundation until the middle of this century (and thus violated their self-professed neutralist commitments) that the private and parochial school movement took hold in America. In neither case does the position of private schools reflect or advance each country's public educational aims, despite their giving dissenting families a private educational outlet. It does not make sense, therefore, to try to integrate public and private education policies into a single, coherent model, because no such coherent, principled stance exists. (England's sympathetic attitude towards private schooling, by contrast, is completely consistent with its approach to public education, as Section I will show.)

<sup>5</sup> In this sense political liberalism is often contrasted with comprehensive liberalism – i.e., liberalism stemming from a commitment to autonomy or other comprehensive conception of the good life – which theorists such as Rawls and Macedo argue cannot reasonably secure the support (even hypothetically) of all members of society. It is in terms of this contrast that political liberalism should be understood in this article. I have intentionally not grounded it in a more specific theoretical framework or author (such as Rawls's *Political Liberalism*) because it is political liberalism's general implications, as opposed to any particular formulation, that I am interested in examining in this article.

lives of children and families by leaving their private lives and commitments essentially untouched – or at least unchallenged – if possible. Education in the democratic virtues would, under this analysis, ideally take place within a context that respected or even affirmed children's private commitments (assuming that the affirmation of one set of commitments did not interfere with those held by other children).

This weighting of the private versus the public suggests that the philosophy of school provision exemplified by England might best satisfy the demands of political liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Under the English model, families are (in theory) permitted to separate themselves into more-or-less homogeneous groups based on common interests and commitments. The state then partially funds ('maintains') schools that cater to these private interests.<sup>7</sup> According to the 1985 'Swann Report' delivered by the state-sponsored Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups:

The right of ethnic minority communities to seek to establish their own voluntary aided schools is firmly enshrined in law. Under the provisions of the 1944 Education Act ethnic minority communities, along with any other group of individuals, are entitled to make proposals for the establishment of a voluntary aided school to cater for their children's educational needs.<sup>8</sup>

If we consider religion, for example, we see that in England today, the state supports voluntary Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Jewish schools, and may eventually approve assisted or grant-maintained Muslim schools as well.<sup>9</sup> Although these schools may not discriminate among prospective students on the basis of ability, they can discriminate on the basis of religion;<sup>10</sup> thus, a publicly-maintained Catholic school, for instance, can refuse entrance to all non-Catholic children. In practice only 32 per cent of English state schools are church-affiliated,<sup>11</sup> and even many of those display minimal or limited religious adherence. In theory, however, this model (and English law) permit the public

<sup>6</sup> This model of schooling also seems to be most like that for which William Galston calls. See William Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 241–56.

<sup>7</sup> Financing and governance of religious schools, for example, is somewhat complicated; depending on the extent of church contribution to the maintenance of the school, the governing body is either church-dominated or state-dominated, and curriculum decisions are concomitantly more or less church influenced. See Education Act 1944 (London: HMSO) and Education Reform Act 1988 (London: HMSO).

<sup>8</sup> Lord Swann, *Education for All* (London: HMSO, 1985), p. 499.

<sup>9</sup> The fate of Muslim schooling in England is a complex one that itself symbolizes many of the conflicting pulls within liberalism discussed in this article. In a longer article, it would be illuminating to discuss Muslim schools' supposed violation of the principles of equal and democratic education, and the implications of this judgement for the place of Muslim families and citizens within the liberal polity in general.

<sup>10</sup> See Education Reform Act 1988, Section 30, subsection (3): 'A local education authority shall, if so requested by the governors of an aided or special agreement school maintained by the authority, make arrangements with the governors in respect of the admission of pupils to the school for preserving the character of the school.'

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, *Statistics of Education: Schools* (London: HMSO, 1993), pp. 140–2.

school essentially to accommodate itself to private commitments, functioning almost as an extension of the child's private upbringing as opposed to establishing a rigidly differentiated public space or institution. The state satisfies the public as a whole by providing 'something for everyone' in the form of a compilation of state-funded private spaces. But, at least in theory, no single school need encapsulate the entire 'body public'.<sup>12</sup>

Nor is religion the only axis along which families may separate themselves within the state school system in order to form the equivalent of 'independent state schools',<sup>13</sup> as former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher approvingly terms them. Since the establishment of numerous parental choice schemes in the 1980 and 1988 Education Acts, parents and children can 'privatize' public education to meet their particular needs and commitments in a number of ways. The most obvious of these is the Assisted Places Scheme, established by the 1980 Education Act,<sup>14</sup> which explicitly provides money for deserving students to attend private schools. State financing of private as opposed to public schools may be the logical response to liberalism's call for state non-interference with individuals – but it remains to be seen whether such action is compatible with a similar maintenance of democracy. Even within the context of public schools, 'open enrolment' and parental choice rights detailed under the 1994 'Parents' Charter' provide extensive opportunities for parents and children to segregate themselves into schools that reflect their particular commitments or associations. For instance, every school must publish an annual prospectus that details not only examination and attendance statistics, but also 'the aims and values of the school and its approach to teaching' and 'how they provide moral and spiritual guidance for their pupils'.<sup>15</sup> Parents are encouraged to use these statements of purpose in order to choose a school for their child – and thus to ensure that their children are educated in a school whose ethos explicitly favours the particular commitments and values held by the family.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, class differentiation and segregation has re-emerged in some public schools as a result of parents' increased powers to choose. Popular schools with more requests than places can decide which students to take in a process that *The Economist* acknowledges often leads to 'pupils being "selected" by schools (offspring of the middle-classes preferred), rather than

<sup>12</sup> Again, I do not mean to suggest that all (or even a majority of) English schools fit this model in practice, nor that English society is as radically divided as this description might imply. As I explained above, what is of significance in this article is not the empirical outcome of these models of schooling, but their theoretical limits; i.e. English education is structured so as to *permit* the effective privatization of nominally public schools, and thus also to permit the establishment of the divided pluralism I will describe below.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 570.

<sup>14</sup> Education Act 1980 (London: HMSO), sec. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education, *Our Children's Education: The Updated Parent's Charter* (London: HMSO, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Education Act 1980, secs. 6–7.

vice versa'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, some schools have reintroduced selective examinations – examinations which, again, have been criticized as a short-hand method of reintroducing class-based segregation within supposedly public schools.<sup>18</sup> In sum, the English model of school provision permits parents and children considerable latitude in separating themselves from other students who are 'different' (be it on religious, moral, intellectual or class-based grounds), and thereby allows them, too, to shape the public school to reflect and reinforce their private aims and values. In this respect, at least, the 'privatization' of the public school in the English model seems well on its way.

Unlike truly private schools, of course, even voluntary (denominational), grant-maintained and specialized public schools are required to teach the National Curriculum – a comprehensive syllabus for 5–16 year-olds that is ostensibly intended to take up 70–80 per cent of school time.<sup>19</sup> The National Curriculum thus might be seen as a unifying public force among an otherwise divided school system. It is notable, however, that the presumptively most public element of the curriculum – Education for Citizenship – is not included in the list of the ten 'foundation' subjects in which students are formally assessed for competency and achievement. Rather, as one of a group of subjects designated to be 'cross-curricular themes' (the others being health education, economic and industrial understanding, careers' education and guidance, and environmental education), citizenship is designed to be taught only within the context of the other disciplines.<sup>20</sup> It is not thought to warrant a class on its own. Nor are teachers or students given much guidance as to what citizenship (or citizenship education) is meant to entail. In contrast to the massive government publications that detail with exquisite precision every dimension of the foundation subjects, the National Curriculum Council has published a single workbook about citizenship education, and provides no standards for assessing

<sup>17</sup> 'Parent Power', *The Economist*, 25 March 1995, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Disillusion with the class-based homogeneity of selective grammar schools was one of the primary reasons for Labour's introduction of non-selective 'comprehensive' schools in the 1960s. As the 1967 Plowden Report made clear, 'Selection for secondary education ... has been criticized as being socially divisive both because it gives middle class children a better chance than manual workers' children to secure grammar school places, and because it gives better career openings to grammar school than to modern school pupils. The same arguments are also used against selection for primary school classes, or streaming.' (Central Advisory Committee for Education, *Children and their Primary Schools* (Plowden Report) (London: HMSO, 1967), p. 288, paragraph 809.) See also Department of Education and Science, *The Organization of Secondary Education*, Circular 10/65 (London: HMSO, 1965); J. Stuart Maclure, *Educational Documents* (London: Methuen, 1973); David Rubinstein and Brian Simon, *The Evolution of the Comprehensive School 1926–1966* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); Clyde Chitty, *Towards a New Education System: The Victory of the New Right?* (London: Falmer Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Ron Dearing, *The National Curriculum and Its Assessment: Final Report* (London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1994), paragraphs 2.2, 3.24, 4.28–29; Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 594.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the structure of the National Curriculum, see Jim Sweetman, *Curriculum Confidential Two: The Complete Guide to the National Curriculum* (Tamworth, Staffs.: Bracken Press, 1992).



students' progress.<sup>21</sup> While the theory behind this division between 'foundation subjects' and 'cross-curricular themes' may (or may not) be sound, in practice it leads to the marginalization and effective exclusion of citizenship education from the public school classroom. Thus, I suggest that not even the National Curriculum succeeds in reinstating the body public within the potentially divided and privatized space of the publicly maintained school.<sup>22</sup>

This analysis of the English model of school provision also reveals the source of my claim that such a system may foster (or arise from) 'divided pluralism' – i.e., a pluralistic national community composed of a number of mutually uninterested mono-religious, mono-cultural, mono-linguistic or mono-economic subcommunities. By providing schools that reinforce families' private values and experiences, the state helps to perpetuate a polity that is composed of a number of separate, thriving cultures. In a sense, therefore, such a system fosters a multicultural national society. Multiculturalism itself, however, is not treated as a public good; in an important sense, pluralism is merely an accidental public by-product of a private-regarding school system. Nor does pluralism necessarily *become* part of public culture or the public identity of citizens and the state, since future citizens (i.e., children) are not necessarily encouraged in school to embrace or even experience communities and values other than their own. This is not to say that the National Curriculum Council does not pay lip-service to the demands of multiculturalism. As one of the two 'dimensions' of cross-curricular education, multiculturalism is credited with being at the core of a successful curriculum. 'A commitment to providing equal opportunities for all pupils, and a recognition that preparation for life in a multicultural society is relevant to all pupils, should permeate every aspect of the curriculum.'<sup>23</sup> This written acknowledgement of multiculturalism's importance, however, is as far as the National Curriculum Council and the state go in actually establishing education for a multicultural society.

<sup>21</sup> What little guidance is given is to be found in the National Curriculum Council's *Education for Citizenship: Curriculum Guidance 8* (London: National Curriculum Council, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> It is possible, of course, to integrate citizenship education into the curriculum under a different name – through history and literature classes, social studies, and so forth. While some of this might go on in the National Curriculum as it stands, I suggest that for three reasons, it still does not satisfy the demands of civics education. First, students in English schools do not learn about the parliamentary system, the structures of state and local government, the passage of a bill through Parliament, etc., unless they specifically take an A-level course in British politics. This seems an unacceptable lacuna in any curriculum that is meant to restore public character to and inculcate civic virtues within an otherwise (potentially) privatized school system. Secondly and relatedly, civic concerns have thus far been addressed in the National Curriculum foundation subjects only within the history curriculum – a practice that may engineer the illusion of a common past, but which does not succeed in building a conception among students of a shared, public *present* or *future*. Finally, in so far as the National Curriculum itself provides for citizenship education as a separate, albeit cross-curricular, 'theme', the criticisms above of its (lack of) inclusion in the curriculum continue to hold true.

<sup>23</sup> National Curriculum Council, *Curriculum Guidance 3* (London: National Curriculum Council, 1990).

While the English model of schooling admirably fulfils political liberalism's promise to leave citizens alone to pursue their own private conceptions of the good, it seems less successful in inculcating the public virtues needed for the maintenance of a liberal democracy. The nearly total weight placed on liberty (and the public-private distinction) as opposed to democracy (and education for citizenship) leaves this model of school provision open to challenges from within political liberalism itself. Four objections to the English model present themselves. First, it can be argued that students cannot learn to be tolerant and mutually respectful of other people, traditions and ways of life unless they are actually *exposed* to them. It is not enough to talk about tolerating others within the safety of mutually reinforcing, homogeneous groups as the English approach allows; toleration can be acquired only by interacting with others in a mutually respectful but challenging, heterogeneous setting. This is an empirical claim about both psychology and pedagogy that itself requires further justification in order to be fully compelling; it does serve to cast some initial doubt, however, on the ability of schools as described above to provide the type of democratic education required for political liberalism to succeed.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, the English model neglects the nature of toleration within a liberal democracy. In order to be tolerant, political liberals generally agree, it is necessary that we possess some measure of detachment from our own personal commitments. We can accept other people's conceptions of the good as reasonable – and therefore as worthy of respect and toleration – only if we are able to see our own commitments as in some way contingent. This sense of contingency demands in turn a level of intellectual, if not emotional, detachment from our own conceptions of the good. The appropriate sense of detachment, however, cannot be adequately fostered in a school that is purpose-built to reflect the personal aims and conceptions of the good of children and their families (as the English model is). A more separate, *public* space must be established instead, one which provides an environment distanced from the commitments promoted by children's home communities and families. Only in this way can toleration actually be achieved, because only in such a setting can children come to recognize the contingency of their own attachments.

Thirdly, I suggest that further implications follow from this vision of the school as a public space that must be explicitly constructed and differentiated from the private spaces of children's everyday lives. Because of the radical

<sup>24</sup> It might be argued that such interactions can and do take place outside the school – in the neighbourhood, or in mandatory national service programmes evident in countries like Israel and Switzerland – and thus that it is unnecessary for the *school* in particular to take responsibility for establishing a heterogeneous setting in which children are intentionally exposed to difference and taught to be tolerant. While it is true that schools are not the only social institutions to teach toleration and expose children to diversity, they none the less strike me as being one of the most important. Not only are they under direct state control – and can therefore explicitly adopt the aims of political liberalism as their own – but they also reach children when they are very young, as national service programmes, integrated workplaces and other institutions do not. Although this is not an analytic argument, I would suggest on pragmatic grounds at least that schools must play a central role in teaching toleration and bringing different groups together in one place.

pluralism that characterizes modern society, a necessary condition of individuals' becoming a 'people' or 'public' is that they be able to identify – and to identify with – a shared, communal space or institution. It is out of the common commitment to the visible, even physical, institutions of public life that citizens come to tolerate each others' private differences. Children, as future citizens, develop these attachments best within the context of a public school that models in miniature this national public square. Just as it is not enough for adults to overcome the mutual mistrust and intolerance implied by radical pluralism in the absence of a set of common spaces and institutions to which they all feel connected and for which they feel mutually responsible, neither is it sufficient for children to discuss the principles of liberal democracy abstractly and from positions of mutually exclusive difference. Instead, I would conclude, *a public space or body must be created in which children participate in common and with which they identify*. This aim is clearly not fulfilled by the English model of schooling presented above.

Finally, in contrast to the 'book-learning' in civic virtue that children experience in the 'privatized' public schooling represented by the English model, I would suggest that children can practise the civic virtues and establish them over time as habits of character only within a truly *public* school. As the American educational reformer Theodore Sizer terms it (presumably following Aristotle), the capacities for critical reflection, detachment and toleration are dependent upon children's developing proper *habits* within a suitably-designed and structured community. 'Habit grows from a mixture of conviction ..., of practice ..., and of *reinforcement from the community* ... It is the habit of thoughtfulness, of bringing an informed, balanced, and responsibly skeptical approach to life, that schooling addresses.'<sup>25</sup> The public school, under this reading, should thus be intentionally constructed so as to provide a true model in miniature of the body public, in which children interact and participate so as to build the habits of civic virtue necessary for the long-term preservation of liberal democracy.

Two responses are possible to this set of objections against the English model of politically liberal education outlined above. One might attempt to refute each of the four objections, to prove that the divided, 'privatized' public education represented by English school policy is indeed adequate to teach the civic virtues and habits of character necessary for democratic citizenship, and thus is adequate to preserve the structures of liberal democracy. Such a refutation might rely on broad theoretical and empirical arguments that apply to most states and most children; it might also be made in reference to a smaller field such as a single state which is distinguished by certain unique characteristics. 'In most communities', this latter argument would run, 'the objections to separate

<sup>25</sup> Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 69 (*italics mine*). On the subject and importance of habits, see also John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Random House, 1922), Part I; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, revised trans. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1103a15–1104b3, 1179b20–1180a23.

culturally, linguistically, religiously or economically homogeneous public schools are sound, but not in *our* community, for the following special reasons' (whatever they might be). Cases in which the English model might be both attractive and compatible with the principles of political liberalism will be discussed in Section IV below.

Many liberals, however, will not find the wholesale rejection of the objections outlined above to be adequate. A second response to the problem of politically liberal education, therefore, is needed – one that engages more directly with the issues that are involved, especially with the need to foster reasonable detachment from one's own commitments and to establish the school as a public space in which all children share and with which they all identify. I would suggest that a partial solution to this problem can be found in the policy of *neutrality* represented by the French and American school systems. As we shall see below, both countries consciously establish the school as a public place by adopting a policy of public non-identification with private conceptions of the good. Religion, for example, is strictly excluded from the curriculum and public life of the school in both countries. Public schools are non-denominational; prayer within the classroom (and the school assembly) is strictly forbidden; and school officials remain officially neutral or silent both between specific religions and about religion in general.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, each state's policy of neutrality serves to maintain a strict division between the private and the public by refusing to allow any public school to take a stand on or intentionally to bias individuals' private commitments. At the same time, their neutrality permits children from all backgrounds to enter the school as equals, and presumably to identify equally with the school as a shared (because non-discriminatory) public space.<sup>27</sup> The French and American systems

<sup>26</sup> It might be argued that religion is a special case in both countries – in the United States because of the First Amendment of the US Constitution; in France for historical reasons stemming from the French Revolution, anti-Catholicism and the 'republican school' ideal promulgated by Jules Ferry in the 1870s. (See Mona Ozouf, *L'École, l'Église et la République* (Paris: Éditions Cana/Jean Offredo, 1982); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979).) None the less, both the United States and France pursue educational neutrality in relation to other cultural practices, 'lifestyle choices' and community *mores* as well.

<sup>27</sup> The assumption that neutrality can mean equality even in theory has, of course, been sharply questioned for years by critics of liberalism and of liberal education. Stolzenberg is especially suspicious of 'neutral' education (see fn. 1), contending that from the (reasonable) perspective of fundamentalist Christian parents, schooling in the United States that is neutral among all religious beliefs is patently unequal in relation to their own. In many ways the success of this anti-neutralist argument directly entails the failure of the public square as a theoretical possibility: if neutrality can never translate to equality, then the public square as a space equally open and accessible to all citizens is also a theoretical (as well as practical) impossibility. In so far as this argument could very well put the lie to political liberalism as a coherent theory, it is an essential one to consider. In an article such as this, however, which attempts to *apply* the (presumably coherent) principles of political liberalism as opposed to treating them as objects of study themselves, such criticisms fall beyond the scope of the exercise. Thus, I shall not further address these criticisms explicitly – although they will continue to be explored indirectly, especially in Section III on France, through discussion of other issues.

thus seem to satisfy the public–private distinction, as the English model did, but in such a way that also responds to political liberalism’s concern that the school maintain a public character in which to foster democratic education and the development of civic virtue.

However, this surface similarity between the French and the American approaches conceals an essential difference underlying their two ‘solutions’ to the dilemma of political liberalism, as we shall see in the following pages. Although each country does pursue public neutrality, the two models are intriguingly and importantly distinguished by their contrasting means of achieving this neutral public character – and by implication, their means of achieving (and conceiving) their national civic identity. As I will show in Sections II and III, these differences will have important implications for how each balances the tension between liberalism and democracy, as well as for how each incorporates pluralism into the public school and the public culture. Neither model, however, will be seen fully to resolve the tensions between liberalism and democracy; in certain ways, in fact, weaknesses in both positions will bring us back full circle to aspects of the English model. The conclusion of this article, therefore, will address the absence of a single educational ‘solution’ to the tensions inherent within political liberalism, and briefly consider under what conditions each of the three models might seem most attractive.

## II. BUILDING A ‘MOSAIC’: AMERICAN EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PLURALISM

One can achieve neutrality among a given set of competing claims (values, commitments, conceptions of the good, etc.) in two ways. One way is to exclude all claims from consideration; by ignoring them all, one shows preference towards none. This ‘exclusionary’ approach is characteristic of the French model of public education and will be discussed in Section III. A second method of achieving neutrality is to adopt a policy of equal inclusion instead of exclusion. By somehow accommodating all conceptions of the good within the purview of the school, one can at least in theory create an overall neutral environment in which all people have an equal stake. This, I suggest, is the aim of American education – to create a public school, a public space, and (even more ambitiously) a public national identity, in which all private individuals and identities find inclusion.

Two problems immediately present themselves in trying to accommodate private difference within what is meant to be a shared public space. First, one must answer how this approach distinguishes itself from the English model, which also apparently attempted to accommodate private conceptions of the good within the public sphere. The answer is that under the American model, the inclusion of difference takes place on a local as opposed to (or as well as) a national level. Every school, and not just society taken as a whole, is meant to incorporate difference within its walls. As emphasized in Section I, the English model neither created a local public space with which children could

identify, nor fostered the exposure to diversity and personal detachment from one's commitments that is necessary for the development of toleration and civic virtue. Because of the localization of difference within every school, the American system is able in theory to do both.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, the attempt to accommodate the public school to a diversity of private commitments without losing the public character of the school poses both a logical and a practical challenge. If the 'accommodation' or 'inclusion' of the private within the public means that the public space must be shaped to *promote* the competing demands of individuals' private commitments and values, then the enterprise seems doomed. It is impossible to express 'A' and 'not-A' simultaneously; yet, given the radical plurality of modern industrialized societies like America, this is what shaping the public space to reflect individuals' competing conceptions of the good would require. In addition, even if the claims of reason were somehow met, there is a practical difficulty. One of the primary aims behind modelling the public school after the public square is to establish a shared space in which children from a plurality of backgrounds feel equally welcomed, involved and committed. Only thus, it was suggested at the end of Section I, can children learn toleration, mutual respect and identification with the civic community. If the public school starts promoting all of the diverse and competing commitments held by its students (and their families), however, then many students will presumably feel alienated, since the school will appear to embrace values which they and their families reject. Thus, the inclusionary approach to public (educational) neutrality can succeed only if the *accommodation* of competing viewpoints and values is able to be distinguished from the *promotion* of them.

One might well ask, then, what is meant by the claim that the American model of school provision respects the public-private distinction even as it creates through the school a public space that accommodates the private commitments held by children and their families. I would suggest that under the (in many ways uniquely) American principle of accommodation, *the public space of the American public school is created out of the overlap of individuals' private spaces and interests*. On both a structural and a curricular level, US schools have arguably adopted (and are perpetuating) a conception of shared civic identity and education that is built out of the interaction and accommodation of individuals' separate, private identities.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that *in practice* American schools are always pluralist. Because public schools depend on geographically-defined catchment areas which are often highly segregated, many schools exhibit much less diversity than they should or are intended to do. But, as in my description of the English model, I am interested in the theoretical, rather than empirical, implications of American public school provision.

<sup>29</sup> Consider Horace Bushnell's *Discourse on Common Schools* in 1853, for example: 'This great institution, too, of common schools, is not only a part of the state, but is imperiously wanted as such, for the common training of so many classes and conditions of people. There needs to be some place where, in early childhood, they may be brought together and made acquainted with each other; thus to wear away the sense of distance, otherwise certain to become an established animosity of orders;

In structural terms, children and parents often ‘bargain’ with the school to get special treatment in light of religious, ethnic, linguistic or other cultural differences. Although each school nominally offers the same curricular choices, activities and structure for all non special-needs students,<sup>30</sup> students are frequently excused from lessons or other obligations as a result of their conflicting private commitments or beliefs. Thus, strongly religious students are excused from health class on the grounds that it contravenes their (or often their parents’) religious or moral beliefs by teaching contraceptive techniques; they may also be released from biology class if it presents evolution as fact without giving equal time to ‘scientific creationism’. For similarly religious reasons, children of Jehovah’s Witnesses are excused from the quintessentially public activity of saluting the flag (an exercise that takes place every morning in most of America’s primary school classrooms) because they see it as idolatrous.<sup>31</sup> And non-English speakers are accorded the right by some states to study the full curriculum in their native language if a critical mass of similar students is present in the school or school district.

In all of these cases, the public space of the school shapes and reshapes itself to accommodate the private needs, desires and commitments of its students. In order to keep up its public character (and thus to satisfy the political liberal demands of teaching civic virtue within a context that respects the public–private distinction), it must attract and retain in one place an often overwhelmingly diverse set of students with an equally diverse set of expectations, needs and demands. As a result, the American school arguably tries to be (or become) all things to all people, all of the time. The challenge, of course, is to keep up the masquerade. As I suggested above, if the school *obviously* accommodates itself to such a diversity of private interests, it runs the risk of alienating its students and thus losing its status as a truly public space. The public school under the American model, therefore, must take on a

(F’note continued)

to form friendships; to be exercised together on a common footing of ingenuous rivalry ... Indeed, no child can be said to be well trained, especially no male child, who has not met the people as they are, above him or below, in the seatings, plays and studies of the common school. Without this he can never be a fully qualified citizen, or prepared to act his part wisely as a citizen.’ Bushnell is equally forceful a few pages on: ‘Indeed, I seriously doubt whether any system of popular government can stand the shock, for any length of time, of that fierce animosity, that is certain to be gendered, where the children are trained up wholly in their classes, and never brought together to feel, understand, appreciate and respect each other, on the common footing of merit and of native talent, in a common school.’ (Horace Bushnell, ‘Common Schools: A Discourse on the Modifications Demanded by the Roman Catholics’, in Rush Welter, ed., *American Writings on Popular Education: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 182, 183.)

<sup>30</sup> I say ‘nominally’ because the appearance of a single curriculum open to all often masks the reality of a number of separate, mutually exclusive – sometimes even mutually hostile – curricula in operation at any one school; for a provocative account of this process of curricular differentiation and accommodation within American secondary schools as a whole, see Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* 319 U.S. (1943).

multiplicity of simultaneous identities, hoping both that each facet of its 'personality' will attract some set of students and families (who might otherwise retreat to private or parochial schools), and that out of the overlap of these identities a shared public space will be achieved in which students will confront sufficient diversity and heterogeneity to come to embrace the virtues of toleration, mutual respect, and critical reflection.<sup>32</sup>

We see the same pattern of (re)constructing the public identity of the school (and more generally, the civic identity of the American public square) in the newly-developed 'multicultural' curricula in use in many US primary and secondary schools. The self-conscious recognition of the private within the public is especially notable in two elements of the modern curriculum: the (re)presentation of American history not as a single linear process but as a discontinuous history of a number of different types of 'hyphenated Americans' (African-Americans, European-Americans, Latina-Americans, etc.); and related to this, the translation of the classroom metaphor of America as a 'melting pot' to America as 'mosaic'.<sup>33</sup> Both of these elements are notable, I suggest, because they represent the abandonment of an older, assimilative ideal of the public school and of public life, under which newcomers (children as well as immigrants) were considered to become 'true Americans' only when they had learned to share in a unitary civic identity adopted (and lived) by all. This older vision played itself out in the classroom in the form of civics classes that emphasized the 'melting pot' conception of American identity, citizenship contests and 'school pride' activities (still represented by weekly 'pep rallies' in most secondary schools), and the daily 'Pledge of Allegiance' mentioned

<sup>32</sup> This structural accommodation of the public school to the union of private demands possibly gives insight, as well, into the absence of a national education policy, a national curriculum or national examinations in the United States. Since, I have argued, the public school under the American model is not a homogeneous entity imposed from above but is instead constructed from 'below' from the multiplicity of individual identities, it makes sense that the public school is governed on a local as opposed to national level.

<sup>33</sup> Although the specific terms and characteristic expressions of contemporary multicultural education are relatively new, it should be noted that multicultural education itself has strong historical antecedents. One example of this is the 'hyphenated' characterization of America. As no less a figure than John Dewey declared in 1916, 'Such terms as Irish-American or Hebrew-American or German-American are false terms, because they seem to assume something that is already in existence in America, to which the other factors may be hitched on. The fact is, the genuine American, the typical American, is himself a hyphenated character. It does not mean that he is part American and that some foreign ingredient is in his makeup. He is no American plus Pole or German. But the American is himself Pole German English French Spanish Italian Greek Irish Scandinavian Bohemian Jew – and so on. The point is to see to it that the hyphen connects instead of separates. And this means at least that our public schools shall teach each factor to respect every other, and shall take pains to enlighten us all as to the great past contributions of every strain in our composite make-up.' (John Dewey, Speech to the (American) National Education Association (1916): quoted in Nathan Glazer, 'Multicultural "School Wars" Date to 1840s', *Sacramento Bee*, 28 November 1993, p. F01.)



above.<sup>34</sup> While such activities and curricular requirements seemed to fulfil the *democratic* element of political liberalism, they did so in a way that violated the liberal public–private distinction.

In contrast, the new multicultural ideal expresses a potentially truer form of political liberalism by replacing the goal of assimilation with that of toleration, and the unitary with a plural conception of American identity. Students now learn that only out of the preservation of difference, and of mutual respect among different individuals with different histories and commitments, can the ‘mosaic’ that constitutes ‘hyphenated-America’ be achieved. Schools’ growing recognition of difference also expresses itself in the increasing number of classes on the secondary school level that concentrate on the racial, ethnic and/or gendered aspects of the American experience (to say nothing of the proliferation of such classes, as well as full majors, in many American universities).

Thus, at the level both of curriculum and of school structure, the American model of school provision can be seen as providing an explicit, self-conscious response to the dilemma of political liberalism and political liberal education. By constructing the identity and curriculum of the public school out of the union of students’ private identities and commitments, the American model appears to achieve a balance between the public–private distinction and the demands of civic virtue. This springs in part from a much more positive conception of pluralism than we have yet seen. In contrast to the English model of ‘divided pluralism’ presented in Section I, the American construction of the public school and public identity embraces pluralism as a truly desirable, public good that should be fostered and appreciated at both the national and personal level. By ‘celebrating’ and modelling itself after the pluralist, national public square, the American public school establishes a neutral space into which all individuals are equally welcomed, and thus ultimately achieves the public character that the English school lacks. These characteristics arguably equip it to meet the four objections to the English model discussed at the end of Section I, and (at least in theory) to inculcate toleration, mutual respect and civic identification among its students. Likewise, the very neutrality that establishes the public, democratic character of the school also fulfils the liberal demand that the private be kept free from public interference or manipulation. Students’ identification with certain private commitments is respected and even welcomed into some aspects of the public life of the school, but no set of commitments is actually endorsed by the public school. The public character of the school is built out of, but is distinct from, the private spheres of student life.

Within this ‘celebration’ of the American conception of pluralism and the American model’s apparent solution to the dilemma of political liberalism, however, lurk two potentially fatal weaknesses. Both stem from the incorpora-

<sup>34</sup> ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’ (Quoted from memory; Public Law 829, Section 7 of the 77th Congress. Ch. 806 – 2nd Session. House Joint Resolution 359.)

tion of the public from the private. First, there is the risk that the ‘masquerade’ of realizing the private within the public will work too well. I suggested above that in order to draw all students and families into the school, the American model of the public school has to take on a number of simultaneous identities, accommodating itself in a continual process of reconstruction to meet the expectations of a diverse population. At the same time, however, the school cannot diversify completely. It must retain and even emphasize elements which are common to all students, for as the end of Section 1 argued, it is only in recognizing the *common* demands of civic identity and public life (as represented by the school) that students will come to participate and to acknowledge each other as equal partners in the democratic process. If under the American model, therefore, the public school fails to establish clearly enough its shared, public character, then private identifications and commitments may continue to hold primary sway. Students and families would identify with *their* vision of the school – but not with the public institution taken as a whole. Such a scenario would in effect return us, whether wittingly or unwittingly, to the English model of school provision. The only difference would be that a number of effectively separate, homogeneous schools would co-exist under one school roof in the American model, as opposed to being divided up among separate school buildings as in the English model. Although the proof of this claim falls outside the scope of this article, it could well be argued that such a divided co-existence has already implicitly taken place within American public life, finding its political expression in the proliferation of interest-group and identity-group politics and the increasing division of the *polis*. If such a retreat from civic identification and democratic virtue to local identification and interest politics is a *necessary* outcome of the celebration of the private within public life – i.e., if the Balkanization that many would argue describes American society and political life is a necessary outcome of the accommodationism of American culture and education – then politically liberal education on the American model seems doomed from the start.

This problem becomes even more pointed as we move to consider the other risk posed by the American model of school provision – that the public face of the school could, rather than being overpowered by, itself actually overpower the integrity of individuals’ private commitments. Toleration and civic identification require for their development conscious (and conscientious) reflection about one’s civic or public identity, and about one’s relationship to others in the public sphere. By conceptualizing their private identity as part of – even constitutive of – their public *persona* (as the American model leads people to do), individuals implicate their private identities in the activities of their public selves. Thus, when the public school encourages a student to reflect critically upon her civic responsibilities, for example, it requires that she also reconsider the commitments of her private self. This seems patently to violate the public–private distinction central to political liberalism. This is not to suggest that civic education can ever be kept fully in the public sphere; as I noted in the second objection to the English model above, the public habit of toleration

itself requires that one has come to recognize the contingency of one's private commitments and to adopt a stance of public detachment from one's private values.<sup>35</sup> But, there is a difference between coming to recognize the contingency of one's private beliefs in order to learn to tolerate others – a virtue essential to the preservation of liberal democracy – and subjecting one's private beliefs to wholesale analysis within the public sphere of the school.

I suggested above that the American approach may fail to surmount the private divisions between people and thus fail to establish a truly democratic education in civic virtue. If in this case we see that the same approach may also fail adequately to preserve (observe?) the public–private distinction, the American project seems doomed as an adequate response to the dilemma of political liberalism. In sum, the American model's delicate balancing act between the claims of individual privacy and the common experience of democratic education may fail adequately to satisfy *either* element of political liberalism. By forcing the incorporation of each individual's private identity into the public sphere, the American approach may violate the integrity of the private sphere of children's and families' lives; it also runs the risk of fostering a public square characterized by civic instability and identity politics as opposed to democratic virtue and civic identification.

We must therefore seek out a third solution to the dilemma of a politically liberal education – one that seeks to construct the public character of the school attempted by the American model of school provision, yet manages to separate individuals' private commitments from the public body of the school in a manner different from both the American and the English models. This third 'solution', I suggest, can be found in the French approach to school provision, an approach to which Section III now turns.

### III. SECULARISM AND CITIZENSHIP: THE FRENCH MODEL

The English and the American models left us with two important challenges. First, in order to avoid the downfall of the English approach, the politically liberal school system must establish schools as public spaces that are properly representative of the public square. They must, as far as reasonably possible: bring together a range of students representative of the national society; inspire widespread communal identification and attachment; and consciously and conscientiously inculcate the habits of civic virtue including toleration, civic identity and critical reflectiveness. These requirements have implications both for the overall structure of school provision (for example, public schools should

<sup>35</sup> Peter Gardner gives the argument a strong twist: 'In reply to the objection that cultivating dispositional tolerance involves an unacceptable predetermination of character, we could point out that all education can be seen in this light; to say we should not attempt to influence children's values is to propose abandoning education.' (Peter Gardner, 'Tolerance and Education', in John Horton, ed., *Liberalism, Multiculturalism, and Toleration* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 94–5.)

probably not be denominational or otherwise exclusionary) and for the curriculum that gets taught – implications that for the most part the American model picked up on. The very failure of the American model none the less to achieve a politically liberal system of school provision, however, implicitly conveys the second challenge: namely, that the public character of the school must be achieved without sacrificing a robust distinction between individuals' public and private lives.

It is to these two challenges that the third, 'French' model of political liberal education should be seen to respond. Like the American approach, this model takes a commitment to neutrality as its starting point for constructing the public space of the school and the public identity of its students and future citizens. In contrast to the American model, however, the French neutral public school is created not through a principle of equal *accommodation* of the private within the public life of the school and the individual, but through a principle of equal *exclusion* of the private from the public. Students (as well as all teachers and school staff) are expected to shed their commitments at the school door in order to enter as equals the 'public square' represented by the school. For example, they are forbidden to wear 'ostentatious' symbols of religious affiliation,<sup>36</sup> to claim excused school absences stemming from religious festivals or obligations, and to omit any portion of the national curriculum on cultural, religious or other private grounds. Students are treated as solely public beings from the moment they enter the school gates.

Likewise, the school itself is purged of particularistic commitments in favour of constructing a unified, national character. On a structural level, public schools are resolutely secular and similar, making few if any accommodations for local or regional variations in language, culture or ethnicity, and no accommodations for religious commitment.<sup>37</sup> All are bound to teach the national curriculum (as are many private schools), and none may violate the (ostensibly) secular code

<sup>36</sup> François Bayrou, 'Le texte du ministre de l'éducation nationale', *Le Monde*, 21 September 1994, p. 13. (Translated by Cathie Lloyd, and hereafter referred to as 'Bayrou Circular'.)

<sup>37</sup> It may well be objected at this point that my use of 'public school' is misleading, because even though it is true that all state schools are secular, the French government none the less heavily subsidizes the 'private' Roman Catholic school system. In so far as it partially funds a system of separate, homogeneous schools, the French system might be seen as more analogous to the English than to the American system, and consequently as far less neutral or democracy-advancing than I have claimed. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Roman Catholic schools are the only denominational schools that the French state will financially support; Jewish, Muslim and even Lutheran or Methodist schools have no rights to (and will be refused) governmental funding. I admit that these facts do throw off track the model I have been developing, as well as substantially reducing its usefulness in the framework of the article. As a result, I can only remind the reader that the purview of this article is restricted to (officially) public schools, and that these national models should in the end be taken as just that – models. For more on relations between the French government and Roman Catholic schools, see Ozouf, *L'École, l'Église et la République*.

by which its schedule is governed. In this sense the school is explicitly intended to mirror the secular neutrality of the public square.<sup>38</sup>

On the curricular level, too, anything which smacks of religious affiliation or identity politics is excluded: religion classes are banned; French history is taught in terms of supposedly universally apprehensible ideas and movements, as opposed to in terms of the hyphenated histories of difference and individualism favoured in American classrooms; regional languages such as Breton were until recently not taught or spoken in public schools; and, most tellingly of all, French educators and politicians explicitly acknowledge the aim of the curriculum to teach students to be 'French'. Although this nationalizing vision was first instituted by Ferry's 1870s school reforms, François Bayrou, education minister in the mid 1990s, gave what is probably one of the most striking recent articulations of this aim, and is worth quoting at length:

In France the national and republican projects have been identified with a certain idea of citizenship. This French idea of the nation and republic by nature respects all convictions, particularly religious and political beliefs and cultural traditions. But it rules out the breaking down of the nation into separate communities which are indifferent to one another, and which respect only their own rules and laws and only engage in a simple coexistence. The nation is not only a group of citizens who hold individual rights. It is a community with a destiny.

This ideal is constructed firstly at school. School is the space which more than any other involves education and integration where all children and all youth are to be found, learning to live together and respect one another. If in this school there are signs of behaviour which show that they cannot conform to the same obligations, or attend the same courses and follow the same programmes, it negates this mission. All discrimination should stop at the school gates, whether it is sexual, cultural, or religious discrimination.

This secular and national ideal is the very substance of the Republican school and the foundation of its duty of civic education.<sup>39</sup>

As this quotation potently suggests, the French model explicitly commits itself to the inculcation of democratic virtue and civic identification within its students, consciously shaping the 'Republican' public school to mirror and to establish the unified and 'destin[ed]' character of the national square.

How does such an approach match the demands of political liberalism? I would suggest that at least on the face of things, the French model of achieving public neutrality through private exclusion is able to balance both the liberal and the political (democratic) strands of political liberalism quite well. It preserves

<sup>38</sup> This self-conscious link between the school and the nation is historically grounded in the very founding of public education. As Jules Ferry, the architect of the modern French public school system, declared in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in 1880: 'Religious neutrality in the school...is, in my eyes and the eyes of the Government, the consequence of the secularization of civil power and of all social institutions.' (Jules Ferry, 'Discours à la Chambre des Députés', 23 December 1880, in *Vive La République 1792–1992* (Paris: Archives Nationales, 1992), p. 155 (my translation).)

<sup>39</sup> 'Bayrou Circular'.

the public–private distinction by encouraging – forcing – the private to remain fully separate from public life. By giving no public space or attention, be it affirmative or negative, to the private dimension of individuals’ lives, it arguably preserves in a liberal fashion the integrity and distinctiveness of the private sphere. At the same time, the exclusion of private differences from the public sphere frees up the public space of the school – and the public identity of the individual – to be shaped in service of democracy more fully than either the American or the English models allowed. No longer is the public character of the school constrained by private needs or demands; as a result, the school can devote full attention (or whatever level of attention is appropriate) to achieving the civic educational goals initially set out at the end of Section I and reiterated at the beginning of this section.

It is worth noting that the aims of civic education are easier to achieve in this setting, too, because by redefining people wholly in terms of their public selves, the French model shifts the brunt of democratic education from teaching toleration of private *others* to inculcating mutual respect for public *similars*. Civic virtue under this model does not require toleration of difference, because people’s differences do not enter the public square. Instead, students are taught to see and respect each other as equal, even undifferentiated, inhabitants of the same public space and public character. The French model thereby completely avoids the American trap of blurring the public and the private through conveying substantive messages about the value of others’ private commitments (i.e., that they deserve respect). Individuals’ private identities and commitments simply do not enter the picture.

Despite its apparent success at integrating the liberal with the democratic demands of political liberalism, however, the secular, exclusionary neutrality that motivates the French model may be a double-edged sword. Three objections to the French model present themselves in particular: that individuals’ private differences are in practice swallowed up rather than protected by a homogenizing national public character; that the republican character of the French model is anti-liberal; and that an exclusionary neutrality of the sort represented by the French model must itself be non-neutral, and therefore incompatible with political liberalism. While it is possible to pursue these objections on theoretical grounds alone, I will examine them through the lens of *l’affaire du foulard* – a recent series of cases in which Muslim girls in France who started wearing headscarves to public school touched off a nationwide debate about nationality, immigration, minorities, education, the Republican tradition and the future of France itself.

The initial incident is deceptively simple. In September 1989, three Muslim schoolgirls wore the traditional Muslim headscarf, the *hijab* (misleadingly translated as *foulard* in French), to class in the Parisian suburb of Creil. The headmaster barred the girls from entering, citing a 1937 law prohibiting religious symbols in school; he later offered to permit them to wear the scarf, which covered their hair, ears and necks but not their faces, in the school yard but not in class. A three-month standoff occurred, until finally two of the girls

declared they would remove the *hijab* in class and the fracas (temporarily) subsided.<sup>40</sup> In the meantime, however, the incident had sparked a raucous and hotly-contested national debate about the nature of religious neutrality in the 'republican' school. In November 1989, Prime Minister Michel Rocard took a stand, declaring that 'France could not be "a juxtaposition of communities", it could not follow the Anglo-Saxon models that allowed ethnic groups to live in geographic and cultural "ghettoes", and resulted in "soft forms of apartheid."'<sup>41</sup> Later that spring, the Conseil d'État ruled on the case, taking the more lenient view that each school had the right to set its own policy, with future incidents being decided by local authorities and school officials on a case-by-case basis.

Three years later in November 1993, *l'affaire du foulard* erupted again, this time with four girls being suspended from school in Nantua. In conjunction with this action, the government deported a local Turkish imam who had declared 'Allah's law takes precedence over French law,' and placed an Islamic 'adviser' to the girls' family under house arrest.<sup>42</sup> In response, an estimated 700 Muslim girls started wearing headscarves themselves, until at its peak, approximately 2,000 children (out of 150,000–250,000 Muslim girls attending French public schools) were wearing the *hijab* to class.<sup>43</sup> Although this amounted to only 1 per cent of Muslim girls who attended public school, and less than 0.02 per cent of the French school-age population as a whole (estimated to number 12 million),<sup>44</sup> it caused massive public and governmental outcry. On 10 September 1994, Bayrou announced that he was reversing the Conseil d'État's decision, and would ban headscarves from all public schools:

It is not possible to accept the presence and multiplication of ostentatious signs in school whose signification involves the separation of certain students from the rules of the common life of the school. These signs are in themselves part of proselytisation ...

I would therefore ask you [heads of schools and teachers] to propose to your administrative councils to include in your internal rules the banning of these ostentatious signs while recalling that more discreet signs which indicate

<sup>40</sup> There are many summaries of the initial incident. Some of the most informative include the following: 'Behind the yashmak', *The Economist*, 28 October 1989, p. 68; 'Muslim pupils will take off scarves in class', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 1989, p. A15; 'Muslims object to school ban on headscarves', *Independent*, 15 January 1990, p. 6; Anna Elisabetta Galeotti, 'Citizenship and Equality: The Place for Toleration', *Political Theory*, 21 (1993), 585–605; and Norma Claire Moruzzi, 'A Problem with Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity', *Political Theory*, 22 (1994), 653–72. An interesting summary and interpretation of *l'affaire* to date can be found in 'La saga des foulards', *Le Monde*, 13 October 1994, p. v.

<sup>41</sup> Moruzzi, 'A Problem with Headscarves', p. 68.

<sup>42</sup> 'France, reversing course, fights immigrants' refusal to be French', *New York Times*, 5 December 1993, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> 'France bans Muslim scarf in its schools', *New York Times*, 11 September 1994, p. 4; 'Chador wear spurs battle in France', *Rocky Mountain News*, 1 December 1994, Ed.F, p. 48A.

<sup>44</sup> 'Choice of school is state or Catholic', *Independent*, 8 September 1993, p. 7.

attachment to personal conviction should not be treated in the same way, as the Conseil d'État and administrative jurisprudence have already stated ...

I would also ask you to ask all teachers of all disciplines, all educational personnel, and the rest of your team to explain to the pupils in their charge the double meaning of respect for personal convictions and firmness in the defence of the republican project in our country.<sup>45</sup>

This is where *l'affaire du foulard* now stands. Sixty-eight girls have been suspended from school since the Bayrou directive; the number of girls wearing the scarf dropped from 2,000 in September to 600 in December 1994; and the principles of exclusionary neutrality in service of civic education have been reasserted.<sup>46</sup>

The outcome of *l'affaire*, I suggest, signals the failure of the third and final model for a politically liberal education that effectively balances the liberal principle of respecting individuals' private commitments with the democratic principle of inculcating civic virtue in future citizens. Let us return to the three objections to the French model enumerated above. First, I would argue that the wholesale exclusion of students' private commitments and beliefs from the public sphere of the classroom can result in those students' private identities being swallowed up and replaced by the homogenizing norms and identity of public life.<sup>47</sup> This seems to be the aim of French schooling, in so far as educational and political officials across the political spectrum in France speak with horror of a pluralistic, multicultural society along American lines. To support an 'American' right to difference, former Socialist Minister of Education Jean-Pierre Chevenement warned, would be to prepare France for 'a

<sup>45</sup> 'Bayrou Circular'.

<sup>46</sup> 'Chador wear spurs battle in France', p. 48A. The story has actually become more complicated again since April 1995, when first a court in Lille, and then the Conseil d'État, decided that wearing a headscarf was not 'in itself' necessarily ostentatious and proselytizing. It is as yet unclear what effect these judgements will have on schools' enforcement of the 'Bayrou Circular', since the lack of a clear, unified government position leaves schools in an uncertain position. Presumably some headmasters will seize the leeway given by the Conseil d'État decision and permit Muslim girls to wear headscarves in school, while others will continue to expel those girls who insist on covering themselves. Regardless of how teachers and schools respond 'on the ground', however, the principle banning ostentatious and proselytizing symbols still stands unchallenged. See 'Le Conseil d'État tolère sous conditions l'absence scolaire le jour du shabbat', *Le Monde*, 16–17 April 1995, p. 9; 'Le tribunal de Strasbourg annule l'exclusion de dix-huit jeunes filles voilées', *Le Monde*, 5 May 1995, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> 'Within republican thought, the political and cultural communities are made interchangeable; national political membership implies acceptance of French cultural values and principles.' (Miriam Feldblum, 'Paradoxes of Ethnic Politics: The Case of Franco-Maghrebis in France', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16 (1993), 52–74, p. 55.) See also Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), in which he agrees that: 'By inventing the national citizen and the legally homogeneous national citizenry, the Revolution simultaneously invented the foreigner. Henceforth citizen and foreigner would be correlative, mutually exclusive, exhaustive categories' (p. 46).



Lebanon'.<sup>48</sup> Bayrou speaks of the need to 'build a united, secular society, specifically where schools [are] concerned,'<sup>49</sup> while conservative deputy Pierre Lellouche starkly declares, 'Multiculturalism would be the end of France. You can be what you want to be here – Christian, Jewish or Muslim – but we're all Gauls. The alternative is to create cultural ghettos'.<sup>50</sup> For the French, at least, the exclusion of the private from the public space of the classroom does not only have the *possible* and *unintentional* outcome of the withering up of individual identity, but has such a loss as an explicit aim.

Is such an anti-pluralistic and ultimately illiberal stance the only possible outcome of the French model? Might it not be possible in theory to separate the constructive, exclusionary neutrality of the French approach from its more sinister (that is, less liberal) outcomes in the empirical sphere of French politics? In one sense these are impossible questions to answer, or at least to answer quickly; they share the historical and empirical complexities inherent in the question about American identity politics and fragmentation posed at the end of Section II. But in another sense, the answer seems fairly clear: liberal respect for and protection of private difference cannot coexist with the wholesale exclusion of private difference from the public sphere, especially the sphere of the public school. This is true for two reasons. On the one hand, it is difficult to separate the two strands of one's identity in the way one would have to do in order to preserve the pretence of 'keeping the government out' of one's private life (and thus fulfil the principles of political liberalism) – it seems well-nigh impossible for children to effect such a separation. The relationships children develop at school are often the sole relationships they have outside of the family, and are consequently central to their personal, intellectual and emotional development. It is simply bizarre to think that a Muslim girl could form friendships at school based on a fully secularized, public identity and yet maintain a fully intact and encumbered Muslim identity at home and in her private life. On the other hand, private differences are often based on identification with and obedience to the laws of a particular collectivity, such as the Muslim community. The restriction of difference to the private sphere thus requires that individuals violate the religious or other laws to which they have committed themselves whenever they enter the public sphere of the school. In this respect, children's private commitments as expressed through identification with non-public associations are effectively negated within the walls of the public school.

The second objection to the French approach, that its republican character is ultimately anti-liberal because it desiccates the private sphere, is also implied by the model's rejection of pluralism, of individuals' collective identification

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Moruzzi, 'A Problem with Headscarves', p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> 'France bans Muslim scarf in its schools', p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Lellouche, quoted in 'France, reversing course, fights immigrants' refusal to be French', p. 1.

with non-public communities. Whether or not it is psychologically possible for individuals, including children, to maintain mutually separate or disengaged public and private identities, I suggest that the *state* under this model cannot remain indifferent to individuals' private commitments, as is required by political liberalism. As the state's conception of what civic virtue demands increases, the space left over for individuals' private lives necessarily decreases – and decreases substantially. The public–private distinction may nominally be preserved, but the range of private commitments that are seen not to interfere with the public sphere is shrunk almost to obscurity. Thus, the girls' 'ostentatious' identification with Islam through wearing the headscarf was interpreted in France not only as illegitimate 'proselytization' to other students which violated those students' rights as public citizens, but also as: the encroachment of fundamentalist Muslim terrorism on the French state;<sup>51</sup> an anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian subjugation of women that had the potential to reduce the girls' own empowerment as citizens;<sup>52</sup> and the anti-republican 'ghetto-ization' of French society. People from the political left as well as the right argued to ban the *hijab* in school on all of these grounds – all of which, notice, are overtly spun in terms of the *public* rights and duties of citizens. While such reasons ostensibly make no claims upon the private sphere of individuals' lives, I would argue that they depend on such a thick notion of the state and of civic virtue as to be incompatible with political liberalism.

Finally, I would also suggest that 'neutrality by exclusion', which constitutes the foundation of the French model, is itself non-neutral and therefore illiberal. In order to exclude a private conception of the good such as religion from the schools, someone must decide what is to count as religious display or practice – and, correlatively, what is to count as non-religious display or practice (that is, as religiously insignificant or irrelevant). This requires the adoption of a public norm from which religious practice is seen to diverge. The problem is that it is impossible to conceive of a norm which itself is not religiously charged. Consider Bayrou's distinction between 'ostentatious' and 'discreet' symbols of religious affiliation. A symbol of religious affiliation is ostentatious by definition only if it departs substantially from the norm. By banning ostentatious symbols from the school yet permitting subdued displays of religious affiliation or belief, Bayrou is in effect identifying the public space of the school with the prevailing religious norm. In practice, this means that Muslim headscarves are excluded as ostentatious, while crucifixes are officially deemed to be discreet. Such a distinction hardly seems compatible with the ideal and maintenance of the secular school! The religious norm of the community, in this case Christianity, is thus implicitly embraced by the supposedly secular school, and Christianity comes ultimately to define the boundaries of the public square.

<sup>51</sup> See 'La saga des foulards', p. v.

<sup>52</sup> See Laurent Joffrin's interview with Elisabeth Badinter, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 9–15 November 1989, pp. 70–1.

It is worth noting that this conclusion holds *even if* 'discreet' symbols were banned from school, as becomes clear if we turn even cursory attention to the rules, structure and schedule of French public schools. For example, French schools forbid the wearing of hats or other head coverings inside the school building, but this ban is interpretable as 'secular' only within the context of a Christian society. For Jews and Muslims, going bareheaded is as much a mark of (Christian) religious affiliation as covering one's head is seen by Christians to be a mark of (Jewish or Muslim) religious affiliation. The same is true for the attendance schedule in French schools. As Norma Moruzzi reminds us, 'the French school week runs through part of Saturday, and the only full day of rest on the weekend is Sunday. That practice is a happy compromise of the religious and the secular, unless your religion is other than Christian, in which case the secular school week may seem very much religiously defined.'<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the exclusion of 'discreet' versus 'ostentatious' religious symbols, therefore, religion can never be fully excluded from the construction of the public school (or the public square). In this case, at least, exclusionary neutrality is a contradiction in terms.<sup>54</sup>

In sum, I suggest that while the French model ostensibly attempts to achieve the same aim as the American model does – namely, to balance equally the demands of citizenship and the necessity of preserving the public–private distinction – it does so in a way that ends up ransoming the private dimension of individuals' lives to the public demands of civic identification and virtue. In so far as the 'cosmetic' exclusion of private difference from the public school (that is, excluding overt symbols of religious commitment) is buttressed by an explicitly assimilationist (and thus anti-pluralistic) curriculum that attempts to turn all children into 'French(wo)men',<sup>55</sup> the French approach effectively sacrifices liberalism to democracy and political liberalism to the republican ideal.

<sup>53</sup> Moruzzi, 'A Problem with Headscarves', p. 664.

<sup>54</sup> This conclusion rings especially true since the Conseil d'État's decision on 14 April 1995 to permit Jewish students to miss Saturday classes, under certain conditions, in order to observe the Sabbath. So long as it neither impedes the students' studies nor interferes with the life and public order of the school, headmasters may, at their own discretion, release observant Jewish students from Saturday classes. Although the Conseil d'État's decision was accompanied by a companion judgement that Muslim headscarves are not necessarily 'in themselves' ostentatious, it none the less raises the question of whether it is really the principle of *la laïcité* that remains at work in French education, or if it is more truthfully (and condemnably) anti-Muslim sentiment and fear that drives French public schooling. As one 14 year-old Jewish student comments in this regard, 'Of course I am in favour of permitting [Jewish students to take Saturdays off] when possible. But it is hard to swallow allowing Jews to skip Saturdays when Muslim girls are forbidden to wear the *foulard*.' (' "Dieu pardonne, l'examen ne pardonne pas" ', *Le Monde*, 16–17 April 1995, p. 9 (my translation).) See also 'Le Conseil d'État autorise sous conditions l'absence scolaire le jour du shabbat', *Le Monde*, 16–17 April 1995, pp. 1 and 9.

<sup>55</sup> Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

#### IV CONCLUSION

In searching for a response to the defects of the French model, we might return, full circle, to England – to an ideal of a politically liberal education that neither tries (pretends) to achieve neutrality within the space of a single school, nor attempts to shape individuals' private selves and commitments to fit the public mould of civic obligation. But, of course, recovering the English model is not a solution, for the original problems that drove us to develop the American and French models in the first place still remain – namely, its lack of attention to democratic education, and its indifference to establishing a truly public space in which pluralism and toleration could flourish. Liberalism and democracy were no better balanced by the English system of privatized public schools than they are by a French system that 'publicizes' private selves, or for that matter, than by an accommodationist American system in which individuals' public and private identities nestle uneasily inside each other like Russian *matrioshka* dolls. Each of the three models has strengths that the other two lack. But each also has weaknesses that make it unfit as a universal template for politically liberal education.

What does this mean for political liberalism, and for the fate of politically liberal education and societies? For political liberalism itself, it means that its liberal and democratic commitments are possibly irreconcilable on a practical level, and therefore that the theory is subject to an irremediable internal tension. This tension may or may not be productive. But, it does raise some important questions about political liberalism's claim to superior legitimacy and stability within modern political theory. As I noted at the very beginning of Section 1, political liberalism is often justified by reference to its supposedly wide appeal among plural groups in society, and thus its superior legitimacy as a stable foundation for the liberal polity. If, however, because of its inability to balance its liberal and democratic ideals, politically liberal education can neither create nor sustain a balanced, viable liberal democracy, then its superiority to other political doctrines is cast into doubt and demands reanalysis.

The outcome for education is also complicated. Because of the complexity of the relationships that we have seen between liberalism, democracy, national culture, pluralism and education, I would suggest that at this point a heavy dose of messy empiricism comes into play. Although no model perfectly achieves the politically liberal ideal (in theory, let alone in practice!), each one may be appropriate for particular circumstances. The French model may make sense in a historically fractured or Balkanized society, where individuals' private commitments completely define their public roles, and where mutual intolerance of private difference might be overcome only through an approach which sets aside all private beliefs as irrelevant to the public sphere. The English model, by contrast, may be appropriate to a society in which private beliefs have become stunted and lost. Rather than emphasize points of commonality between people, such a society might need to buttress the efforts of individual families to educate their children in determinate and rich conceptions of the good. Many

right-leaning thinkers in the United States, in fact, have begun to suggest the necessity for such an approach in America, as they see the ultimately dehumanizing culture of consumerism and *laissez-faire* morality taking over the nation's youth. Finally, the American model too has its place, although it is difficult to characterize quite so simply what such societies look like. As the approach which most consciously (and conscientiously) tries to balance the two spheres of political liberalism, the American model is arguably most flexible and appropriate for the greatest number of pluralistic, multicultural communities. If its inevitable outcome, however, is the separatism and identity politics discussed at the end of Section II, then it may ultimately be unsuitable for any national community – the United States included.

Ideally, a hybrid model might be sought, one that bridges the strengths of all three approaches, but it is difficult to engineer one that will not end up collapsing into one of the three 'purer' types presented above. One of the most plausible hybrids, in this sense, is a model that recognizes certain axes of self-segregation as permissible while refusing to permit other, more threatening types. James Coleman points out that in the United States, 'Catholic schools are less racially and economically segregated than are US public schools; this suggests that, when a school is defined around and controlled by a religious community, families may tolerate more racial and economic heterogeneity than they would in a school defined around a residential area and controlled by government officials.'<sup>56</sup> State encouragement of certain types of innocuous grouping among families, along the lines of the English model, could thus plausibly ensure a more common and diversified school experience overall; racial and economic diversity, in this case, are tolerated for the sake of religious homogeneity. As Coleman's study itself demonstrates, however, these patterns of self-segregation and diversification are highly local and pragmatic in character. Theoretical models can exert limited sway, at best, on the empirical judgements necessary for this stage of educational implementation.

Ultimately, therefore, this article ends on a questioning note. While the American approach to school provision may best address the balance between liberalism and democracy, no single model satisfies – in theory or in practice – all of the demands set forth by political liberalism. It is probable that each institutional approach may satisfy certain societies' needs and not others. There is no catch-all solution, however, to the problem of political liberalism, nor especially to the problem of instituting a politically liberal education in an often illiberal world. The education of citizens continues to be a messy business – a messiness that liberal theory would be foolish to ignore.

<sup>56</sup> James S. Coleman, *Equality and Achievement in Education* (London: Westview Press, 1990), p. 243.