Democracy & Education

Pragmatist Thinking for a Populist Moment
Democratic Contingency and Racial Re-Valuing in Education Governance

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Abtract

We examine school governance in populist era, using contemporary readings of pragmatist philosophy. We are in a "populist moment," a time of uprisings and movements of the *demos* making political claims (Mouffe, 2018). School officials in the U.S. are subject to an array of political demands in the form of protests and campaigns. We focus on the struggles around critical race theory in K–12 schools. Glaude (2017) has advocated pragmatism's use in light of racial revaluing and democratic struggle. Rogers' work (2009) has highlighted inquiry, founded on contingency, in the face of disagreement and power struggles. These scholars show us educational governance's dual task in this moment: a revaluing of racialized Others in educational institutions done while simultaneously crafting conditions for deliberative judgment and meaningful policymaking in the face of political contingency. In light of this racial reckoning, we argue that populism presents a democratic irony for educational governance. Racial justice cannot be achieved without populist expression, taking the form of campaigns and persistent nonviolent signals that institutional racism is unacceptable. Yet our populist moment also contributes to the increasing political polarization that makes the conditions for democratic deliberative policymaking more elusive. Deliberative conditions for policymaking and curriculum development in schools are critically necessary for reinventing and reimagining our shared society.

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I N A DEMOCRACY, institutions function politically to help "[regulate] group differences and decision-making" (Sant, 2021, p. 68). Profound and persistent flaws of public education institutions, such as racial opportunity gaps or disparate school disciplinary rates, call into question their legitimacy. Legitimacy is the shared, social recognition of a public institution's power to fulfill its mission on behalf of the demos. By reforming itself in the face of public criticism or demands, an institution can retain its legitimacy in the eyes of the communities it serves. In 2020, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters took to the streets across the U.S. and the world following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers; they were not simply communicating dissatisfaction with institutional policing but a more fundamental

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question of how state institutions treat People of Color. Those protests reignited ongoing public discussions of racism and schooling and have now escalated into heated and sometimes conflicting demands issued to local school boards and state legislatures (Cohen, 2022; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

In our federalist system of governance, both state and local representative bodies have been forums for populist expressions and accompanying backlash related to racial equity and the teaching of racial histories. These conflicts have yielded some important new attention and resources toward equity initiatives (Henderson, 2022; Viega, 2022) but have also generated much misunderstanding and seemingly deeper polarization in many places. Across the over 13,000 school districts in the U.S., boards of education and superintendents have received angry, worried, or fearful petitioners. Since Floyd's murder, well over half of the states in the U.S. have introduced or passed legislation that prohibits the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) and related "divisive" concepts, which are necessary for naming, analyzing, and confronting institutional racism (Ray & Gibbons, 2021; Stout & Wilburn, 2022). The BLM protests and the anti-CRT protests reflect our contemporary "populist moment" in global politics (Mouffe, 2018, p. 1), and political pragmatist thinking is needed to understand and respond to these events.

This essay explores contemporary populist scholarship to construct a pragmatist political analysis of democratic governance conditions for U.S. public schools. Pragmatist philosophy is an important resource for this populist moment because it views democracy to be a contingent condition, requiring revision and remaking. In this framing, some types of populist expression are seen as a required part of pushing against static structures which prevent democratic ideals from being realized. We use pragmatism to analyze controversies over CRT and the present racial reckoning in K–12 schools, drawing on the work of two prominent African American pragmatist thinkers. Eddie Glaude (2017) has named the concept of the racial value gap, which is "the belief that White people matter more than others" (p. 31), and calls for a revaluing of African American people and perspectives. His work describes the urgent social and political task of reconstructing democracy to account for structural racism. Glaude's writings show the importance of populist expression against the racial status quo in the U.S., as part of this revaluing task. The success of racial revaluing work depends, however, on how educational governance can successfully take up institutional forms of racial revaluing, in response. The philosophy of Melvin Rogers (2009) has helped us explore this point, as his work has usefully employed Deweyan intersections of deliberation, shared inquiry, and mutual responsiveness that are requisite conditions for any policy-making work in democratic governance. Rogers's work has shown what is required for democratic judgment and policy-making amid contingency, the condition in which profound political and moral disagreement combine with present conditions of eroding institutional legitimacy for public schools.

Efforts to confront institutional racism have been energized and propelled by populist expressions over generations, yet paradoxically, these efforts cannot make progress without requisite social and political conditions for inclusive deliberation among citizens, political and educational institutions. Populist efforts must be realized through policy and other changes directed towards racial equity reforms, carried out through functional institutional channels of debate, deliberation, and decision-making. Our "populist moment" ironically makes these deliberative conditions more elusive in our increasingly polarized institutions. Conditions for fair, inclusive deliberation among parties who disagree are, however, critical for the reconstruction of new American narratives—helping diverse communities "tell better stories about what truly matters to us," as a people, as communities, in light of more honest historical, sociological, and political education regarding racial injustice (Glaude, 2017, p. 202). These stories are sparked in school communities by the push of populism and grown through the opportunities for truth-telling and dialogue found in deliberative work. Yet the very conditions that are fostering populist expression in school governance are the same ones that can inhibit these expressions from sparking and sustaining racial reform of our educational institutions.

To defend this claim, we unfold the argument in three parts. In the first, we define and explain populist politics and their significance to democratic institutions and change. The second section uses the writings of Glaude to understand the present racial reckoning as necessary for breaking of our present conditions in public education institutions. The third section focuses on governance, showing how the conditions for educational governance at the local and state levels are increasingly hampered by populism's current ascent.

This Populist Moment

We are in a "populist moment," a time of frequent uprisings and movements of the demos making political claims (Mouffe, 2018, p. 1). Well-documented across scholarly literatures, populism is characterized by the ongoing expressions of fundamental tension between "the people" and those governing them, viewed as elites in the populist framing (Aslanidis 2020; Laclau, 2007; Mazzarella 2019; Mounk 2018; Mudde 2004; Sant, 2021). Populism happens when the people come to life as a form of expressed agency or articulation (Boyte, 2007, 2012; Laclau, 2007).

Around the country, school boards and state legislatures are hearing demands from the public regarding, among other things, the proper ways to teach about race and racial diversity in U.S. classrooms. Parents attend school board meetings to demand that schools teach more honestly about race in classrooms or to address conditions of inequality of resources or outcomes for their children. Many advocate for greater attention and time devoted to racial equity concerns in their schools. Others forward demands that are, in content, polar opposite: that schools should cease from teaching about structural racism or advancing equity efforts (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). These parents are part of resistance networks organized against what has been characterized as CRT in public schools, which is asserted to be both widespread and un-American (Jorge, 2021; van Lier, 2021). Though they are

constructed of different groups and advocate for conflicting aims, the people are coming to life, around racial issues, in U.S. educational politics, and as is typical of contemporary populist expression, these demands are being amplified by mainstream and social media.

Populism is a political expression of a "we" against an elite "them." By various scholars, it is defined as a "thin ideology" (Mudde, 2004), a discourse (Laclau, 2007), and a cultural phenomenon (Mazzarella, 2019). Populist expression has historical roots around the globe and, today, comes from political organizing on both the political left and the political right. The 2020 U.S. presidential election was a race in which populist discourse was actively in play on behalf of both a prominent Republican and a prominent Democratic candidate. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders represented two versions of rightist and leftist populist enthusiasms of the elections (Sant, 2021). In schools today, comparable expressions are found in parents advocating against CRT and those advocating for schools to teach more honestly and thoroughly about race and inequality in classrooms.

Populism can be understood through a cultural and a political lens. Harry Boyte (2007) has highlighted the cultural dimensions of populism, which he has argued has three elements: a power-building element, which aims to break up unjust concentrations of political influence; a culture-making element, to sustain and advance particular agendas or values; and a civic learning element, wherein citizens are developing skills, imaginations, and identities toward public institutions or problems. This definition illuminates the dynamic political, cultural, and civic elements of populism as enacted by diverse political subjects. Boyte (2012) wrote that "populist movements are narrative. They grow from the sense that an elite is endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted people, its memories, origins, and ways of life" (p. 300).

The cultural dynamics of populism must be understood against the broader political-economic conditions driving the increase of populist expression in democratic politics around the globe (Sant, 2021). Ernesto Laclau (2005) has described populism as a discursive expression and argued that there are several necessary dimensions to populist discourse. The first is a shared sense of a lack, leading to a demand for conditions or policies that are viewed as more just, more fair, more correct than now exist. The demand illuminates the gap, the reason that this formation of "the people" organizes itself into existence. The second dimension of populist discourse is plurality of subject positions and possible demands; rather than a wall of unified demands, populist expression is often much more symbolically than actually unified, in the sense of a coherent plan or agenda for change. The third dimension of populist discourse is what Laclau has called the "chain of equivalence," in which the plurality of positions and demands must be knit together to form a stronger populist demand. Boyte's (2012) cultural view of populist politics shows the potential of democratic populism to ignite real, cultural, political, and institutional change; Laclau (2007) explained the basic

elements of populist discourse as it can develop in political and educational spheres.

The literature on populism helps those of us in education to understand features of populist politics. A key feature is that while signaling demands on behalf of some version of "the people," populist expression often takes the form of emotionally charged demands rather than conveying more reasoned, complex treatments of topics. As Mudde (2004) stated, "populist expression is moralistic rather than programmatic" (p. 544). Piereson (2018) stated it a bit differently: "Populist movements are protest movements identified more by what they are against than by what they are for" (p. 20). Populist expressions convey a sense of a lack or a demand for something. In educational populism, the use of empty signifiers that are already circulating in related discourses are often used to express demands of different types. For example, the call for "choice" is widely used by the educational right for all manner of demands: from those insisting that their children be freed from mask requirements during COVID to those claiming their right to choose a school or even a CRT-free curriculum (Singer, 2020).

An important characteristic of populist politics is that it can convey a sense of democratic failure or crisis, which can serve to strengthen or weaken democratic goals and processes in public institutions. As Piereson (2018) noted, "Populist movements often serve the important purpose of bringing issues to the fore that major parties fail to address or are incapable of addressing" (p. 21). Populist expression, in the case of America's long history with racism, can help provide a sense of urgency for political change. But this sense of urgency is also part of a democratic crisis (Sant, 2021). This crisis is evoked by conditions of upheaval, which provokes fear in those who prioritize the importance of safeguarding the stability of democratic institutions over calls for dramatic reforms of those institutions (Sant, 2021).

Sant (2021) described governance as a process wherein decision-makers try to negotiate between democratic ideals, or aspirational democracy, and what Sant has called "pragmatic democracy," or the politics of compromise among different notions of the good life. The movement between aspiration and compromise is part of democracy's contingency.

Aspirational democracy signals principles of the good life and pragmatic democracy attempts to give responses to everyday problems that mirror these principles. Democracy is always fragile as it is sustained by an unstable balance between aspirations and everyday particulars. (Sant, 2021, p. 77)

Anyone witness to the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, understands the fears of democratic instability and fragility. Yet a democratic crisis, to the philosophical pragmatist, can be seen in an evolutionary light, as the exhibition of the necessary reinventing of democracy and her institutions by way of rejecting, critiquing, and re-norming social groups and our political institutions. Glaude (2016, 2017), in his examination of America's racial value gap, helps us see the need for populist expression as a vital part—but only part—of this larger re-norming project. Rogers (2009), in the last section, helps to reveal the implications for educational governance.

This Populist Moment in Education: Racial Reckonings

Glaude's *Democracy in Black* (2017) has provided a pragmatist philosophical analysis of U.S. politics related to racism and anti-Blackness. Glaude described the present moment as one more chapter in U.S. democracy's incomplete and ongoing racial reckoning, particularly in light of police violence and the insurgency of white nationalist expression in broad political daylight. Glaude also reminded us that this reckoning remains shamefully stalled due to our bad racial habits, institutional racism, and the impotency of (Black) liberalism alone in the face of these challenges.

Glaude (2017) analyzed our fundamental value gap: the persistent fact that "White people in the country where I live are valued more than black people" (p. 38). This gap consists of much more than institutional racism or the condition of policies and practices, which (consciously or not, explicitly or not) create racial disadvantage or adverse impacts for people of color (Shelby, 2016). This is a value gap, kept hidden and disguised from public recognition by what Glaude (2017) called "masking" (p. 61). Many white Americans use racial habits of discourse and thinking in which we perform a belief in racial equality despite conditions that contradict this condition. This performance, often unconscious, functions to side-step the messy contradictions of and remedies for persistent racial inequality, exclusion, and exploitation (p. 61). The racial habits (of speech, thinking, and embodied schooling) of most white people keep institutional racism firmly in place. Racial habits are built up over time (Stitzlein, 2008) and require a provocative and sometimes painful push for most people—especially those who are white—to wake up and revise them. As Glaude (2017) further explained:

> In this sense, racial habits are our inheritance: they contain the history of White supremacy that has shaped and continues to shape this country. They are the millions of accumulated decisions that make racial inequality an inextricable part of what it means to be American. If we are to undo them (at least some of them), something dramatic must happen. And this is one reason the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore were so important. They force us to confront our racial habits. (p. 64).

Glaude calls for a "revolution of value" (p. 182). In light of persistent institutional racism and the habitual denials of racism by many U.S. citizens, we are called to remake our democracy. Glaude evoked Dewey's notion of democracy as "constantly discovered and rediscovered" (in Glaude, p. 190). This rediscovery will not happen in Washington, DC, Glaude argued, but through a broad revolution of value across American life involving three aspects: (1) a breaking of present racial habits; (2) a dramatic shift in how we view Black people and other racial-ethnic identity groups, and (3) a change in the stories we tell about who we are, related to how we view what ultimately matters to us as people of the United States of America (p. 184). A change of this scope must certainly impact public schools as foundational and—importantly, in terms of educational governance—localized institutions of both communities and of the democratic state.

Glaude's (2017) analysis drew upon his embodiment as an African American pragmatist scholar in the contemporary political landscape. He narrated the argument partly through stories of his involvement in marches and demonstrations; he explained that his status as a Princeton professor mattered little when he, as a Black man, is risking tear gas and rubber bullets with other protestors in the BLM movement. Glaude conveyed a reminder that the laws and institutions of political liberalism alone are insufficient to push us off familiar habits of racial masking or those performances that allow us to cover up the ways in which racism shows up in our policies and practices. Only a revolution of value can produce enough impetus to jar us loose from embodied habits, and political liberalism alone will not bring such a revolution. This key claim of populist expression—that liberalism alone is insufficient as a foundation for inclusive democratic governance—is also a view shared by philosophical pragmatists.

BLM has been a significant political movement in the last decade of U.S. and global politics. Hirschmann (2021) noted its historical arc:

> Though the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin whose white murderer was acquitted by a jury in Florida, and gained strength in response to police killings in Ferguson, MO and New York City, it was George Floyd's murder that triggered a series of protests over killings in Kenosha, WI, Portland, OR, and Philadelphia as thousands more people of all races joined in sustained protest marches through the pandemic summer of 2020. (para 1)

Hirschmann and others have debated whether BLM fits the criteria of populist expression as often characterized by movements that seek to "hijack" the state apparatus (Mueller, 2019), such as white nationalists who helped take over the U.S. Capitol in early 2021. BLM groups are not unitary in their demands, but they largely appeal to the laws and institutions of the state to correct racial injustice rather than trying to circumvent or eradicate these legal and structural institutions of democracy.

BLM has clear marks of our populist moment, whether or not political scientists consider it an example of a pure populist movement. By Laclau's (2019) definition, the BLM movement is constructed on a notion of "the people," the political community of African Americans primarily and their allies secondarily, and it presents a persistent set of demands around institutional racism in the U.S. and globally. These demands are directed toward (against) the elites of government and the private sector, who represent legacies of white supremacy and present structures of (sometimes dysfunctional, sometimes impotent) political liberalism. Political scientists disagree on how to classify BLM as either a social movement or a populist one; Hirschmann (2021) has said it is a popular protest movement, not a populist movement. Yet for our purposes, understanding BLM's populist elements is an important context for understanding racial politics in the present era of CRT controversies. BLM pushed more educators, more scholars, and more parents to begin or to reinvigorate school equity initiatives that had been nonexistent, sluggish, or simply more performative ("masking") than substantive. BLM is, as

Glaude (2017) has noted, part of the critical work of addressing the values gap constructed in our racial habits in U.S. life. BLM, we argue, can be read as a form of populism that has developed an authoritative voice to contest institutions, like schools, that help reproduce racial hierarchies and anti-Blackness. It has provoked much populist expression on behalf of racial equity efforts in schools (left populism) as well as backlash against those efforts (right populism).

CRT controversies in education today are best understood as a populist backlash against anti-racist populist movements like BLM. CRT emerged in the 1970s, among legal Scholars of Color to explain and respond to the permanence of structural racism in U.S. society and the impotency of liberalism as a democratic theory to meaningfully remedy it (Alcoff, 2021; Bell, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991). Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (1995) were the first to apply this theory to educational contexts, and Ladson-Billings drew on CRT to develop the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. While the use of CRT has expanded to many fields of study and resulted in diverse interpretations among scholars, CRT theorists broadly agree on both the pervasiveness of racism in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and the need for challenging racism through counter-storytelling, which can resist and subvert dominant narratives and build power among oppressed races (Taliaferro Baszile, 2015).

Politically speaking, in recent years, CRT has been deployed as a discursive straw man in struggles over racial justice; this use is consistent with other populist struggles in education that attempt to build power through a warfare of rhetoric. "CRT has now become a catchall term conservatives apply to any topics or lessons dealing with race and racism, gender identity, sexuality and sexism" (Pendarkar, 2022). An oft-repeated origin story traces the theory's recent political weaponization to conservative organizer Christopher Rufo, who in 2020 opined on conservative media outlets that CRT had infused all levels of federal training and posed "an existential threat to the United States" (Wallace-Wells, 2021). The evidence of alleged CRT infusion into K–12 curriculum is thin; accounts of this evidence are reported by right-leaning journalistic outlets (Dougherty, 2021; Murawski, 2021). While of little true influence in K–12 curriculum, there is much evidence that CRT has gained influence and visibility in higher education. CRT research and writings are prominently cited in educational scholarship, and certainly since George Floyd's murder in 2020, this body of scholarship has made more inroads into educator professional development, teacher training, and graduate programs in colleges of education. CRT is being used as one relatively new theoretical tool helping preservice and in-service educators understand the social construction of race and the racialized patterns of harm in U.S. history, educational policymaking, and structures of teaching and learning in schools.

Despite this more nuanced reality of CRT involvement in K–12 teaching, educational scholarship, and teacher education, every state but Delaware has considered legislation banning "divisive concepts" seen as central to CRT theories, and 28 states, as of this writing, have passed such measures (Alexander et al., 2023; Pendharkar, 2022; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). In our own state of Ohio,

as of this writing, anti-CRT legislation is pending (HB 322 and 327), and groups are organizing to vocalize support for the legislation as well as be on the alert for CRT concepts or ideas polluting education in their schools (public or private) (Welsh-Huggins, 2021). HB 616, and HB 83 (for higher education institutions) have been added to the list of bills under consideration in the Ohio legislature, modeled after the "Don't Say Gay" bill recently passed in Florida.

The rationale for bills banning "divisive concepts" or discussion of racism draws upon a cultural narrative about a true and correct legacy of America as a nation, what Bratich (2020) called part of a "war of restoration" (p. 42). Bill sponsors and advocates assert that CRT theory is a Marxist creation that falsely advanced the viewpoint of America as a racist country, whereas in actuality, "America is the greatest force ever for freedom and equal opportunity," where, "all persons should be protected from the divisiveness and harm of CRT's singular focus on race, especially children" (Stop Critical Race Theory in Ohio, 2021). Don Jones, representative from District 95 who introduced HB 327, stated that "critical race theory is a dangerous and flat-out wrong theory. It is designed to look at everything from a 'race first' lens, which is the very definition of racism. CRT claiming to fight racism is laughable" (Ohio House of Representatives 134th General Assembly, 2021, para 4). Using colloquial and emotionally provocative language, Jones and co-sponsors expressed no need for racial reckoning in education or any other part of our society. The Stop Critical Race Theory in Ohio group's solution is an authoritarian one, punishing teachers or professors who use the forbidden racial concepts. These characteristics of a right-wing populist narrative firmly deny any need for racial reform or reconstruction. In the face of democratic contingency, in our present cultural moment of racial reckoning, there is a buckling down on American exceptionalism and racial habits that mask over present racial realities, both inside of and outside of schools.

For those organizing against "divisive concepts" in K–12 education, the facts and evidence presented by officials or institutions regarding racism are less trustworthy or believable evidence than the values that seem at stake in these political battles. Indeed, values (not factual evidence) expressed in populist politics, and their underlying cultural narratives, are the most significant aspect of our present racial reckoning. First, CRT teachings cannot reliably be found in K–12 classrooms or curriculum, even as these theories are indeed having a cultural impact on education broadly speaking, influencing pedagogy, professional development, and teaching in some regions of the country. Second, history and social studies state subject standards include substantive content related to racial oppression (e.g., slavery, Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, etc.). This means that teachers in these subject areas cannot do their jobs, as prescribed by state educational standards, if they cannot legally discuss racial oppression and the events in U.S. history that perpetuated it. Put simply, the facts of K–12 education in the U.S. make clear that anti-CRT legislation is not concerned with the reality of educational practice so much as the growing threats that those behind the legislation see CRT making toward a preferred cultural narrative focusing on U.S. exceptionalism and reliance on white supremacy values. Anti-CRT and

anti-equity populist expression function discursively to symbolize a value for a particular kind of cultural narrative of America—as a land of opportunity and fairness for all—and serve to mask or deny institutional racism's impacts on educational institutions. As Boyte (2012) noted, "Populist movements are narrative" (p. 300), making them less about facts than values.

Glaude's (2017) pragmatist analysis of race in the U.S. names and conveys the importance of competing values in the present racial reckonings. He has demonstrated, too, the necessity of populist expression as an important political tool in the project of racial revaluing, helping to create the necessary disruption in racial habits and masking which regularly occur in public institutions such as schools. This populist moment has brought with it both a sense of urgency for change in (i.e., revaluing) our racial status quo in education, as well as a powerful push-back against that urgency, convinced that the racial status quo is correct. This push-back increasingly serves as a force to silence or diminish teaching about the difficult historical, political, and social realities of U.S. life (Pendharkar, 2022).

Glaude (2017) has brought a sense of contingency, realism, and hope to our present political situation as it relates to racism and U.S. democratic institutions. The sense of contingency is the pragmatist's understanding of democracy as a perpetually reconstructive project, in the face of an African American thinker's recollection of the deeply traumatic American historical and present conditions of racial oppression. The sense of realism is reflective of the deeply embodied and embedded habits of racism that, without the shock and push of populist expression, will continue unabated in U.S. society and schooling. The sense of hope is the meliorism of the pragmatist political and moral vision, where faith in human social intelligence and growth continue to inform political analysis and reform work. That faith asserts that the current racial reckoning, in a populist political era, can be one where educational leaders and policymakers can successfully use the energies of populism to address racism and other habitualized harms perpetuated by schooling. The meliorism of pragmatist analysis is one of its significant strengths on the long road to racial equity in the United States and underlies the notions of democratic governance elaborated in the next and final section of the paper. It is here that we show the complex paradox of this populist moment in educational politics related to race and racism in the U.S. and suggest ways to navigate these challenging waters.

Education Governance, Contingency, and Racial Reckoning

In considering educational governance through the lens of a revolution in racial reckoning, one of the key challenges is understanding how our present educational governance design might best facilitate and grow racial reckoning progress. In this section, we advance ideas toward that end, while strongly acknowledging the ways that present systems of U.S. public schooling governance serve to reproduce racial injustice (Corcoran, 2012; Kogan et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2019).

Educational governance in the U.S. is often a source of frustration among democracy theorists and education reformers alike. The decentralization and diffusion of powers are an outgrowth of both federalism as well as the uniquely localized histories of public schools. States maintain much control over funding formulas and accountability measures; localities have broad powers of hiring, curriculum, discipline, pedagogy, and special services. Some critics assert that this governance design disadvantages the U.S. education system in a globalized, competitive world: "The United States is hobbled by a design for education governance that reflects a distrust of government, a naïve belief that it is possible to get education out of politics, and a conviction that the best education decisions are those that are made closest to the community" (Tucker, 2013, p. 1). Yet one potential democratic strength of educational governance is most certainly the "conviction that the best education decisions are those that are made closest to the community" (Tucker, 2013, p. 1), or the principle of subsidiarity. Insomuch as community-level governance may be best situated to address the issues of racial reckoning in schools, this strength can bring the power of racial equity educational reform projects or policies, developed at school and district levels, to the work of creating locally grown community coalitions and visions to build and support that work. What one critic calls a fatal flaw, pragmatist theorists of democracy see as a potential strength, when it comes to revolutions of racial value ignited by populist politics. Rogers' (2009) insight helps us defend this claim, revealing how these revolutions require the combination of populist demands as well as the practices of deliberation necessary to bring meaningful reform.

Rogers (2009) wrote *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* to highlight Deweyan democratic thought, focusing on the Darwinian nature of his work: "My claim in making Darwin central to Dewey's later outlook is that important dimensions to Dewey's philosophy will emerge—aspects that have nonetheless been *overlooked, underappreciated*, or *denied*" (p. 14, emphasis in original). Rogers explored the strong notions of contingency built into Dewey's understanding of the public and the state, which has implications for how his democratic theory might help navigate the inevitable but important tensions between representative and deliberative democratic forms of governance. These tensions were at the heart of Dewey's debates with Walter Lippmann, debates that eventually produced *The Public and its Problems* (1927).

As Rogers (2009) noted, Dewey's account characterized democracy as inherently emergent, evolving, and plural—with government institutions, experts, and "the people" in dynamic tension. Dewey, Rogers stated,

> *envisions the public . . . as the permanent space of contingency in the sense that there is no a priori delimitation, except as it emerges from individuals and groups that coalesce in the service of problem-solving and that therefore require the administrative power of the state to address their concerns. This description of the public envisions it as a standing in a directive and supportive relationship to the state and its representative and administrative institutions.* But insofar as the state is resistant to transformation because of ossification, the public then functions in a more oppositional role that builds its power external to the state. *(p. 225; emphasis added)*

Dewey's account of the public is Darwinian in its envisioning of democracy as an evolving, inherently impermanent matrix of conditions, (tentative) agreements, and traditions that are at times being revised and sometimes revoked. At present, we in the U.S. feel a great sense of fear with regards to our democracy's strength and stability—a January 2022 poll found that 64% of Americans agree with the statement "American democracy is in crisis and at risk of failing" (Rose & Baker, 2022). Rogers (2009) reminded us that for pragmatists, democracy is ever an experiment, one that relies on the dance between government institutions, experts, and the people themselves, organized into coalitions advocating for change, making demands and appeals. That's part of the job of educational publics, organizing around schools or school issues: to help these institutions, that can sometimes defy or resist change, to transform conditions, habits, or ideas as cultural change requires (Knight Abowitz, 2014).

Populist expression is the ability of groups to articulate urgent need for reform, but such expression always requires scrutiny, as populist demands may or may not yield democratic advances in institutions. Scrutiny and inquiry are necessary to ensure that institutions properly and inclusively define, evaluate, and address the issues at hand. Inquiry is the issue at the heart of the famous quote from *The Public and Its Problems*: "The man who wears the shoes knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (Dewey, 1927, p. 207). Populist expression often brings "pinching" complaints, problems acutely or even painfully experienced by some segment of "the people" to the attention of elected or appointed governing bodies, with the expectation of remedy. Populist expressions, thus, can spark inquiry into the conditions of the person who wears the shoes or those who are closest to any particular problem. Policymakers and legislators weigh these expressions of the problem with political judgment—the knowledge expressed by local constituents alongside the (more distant, broader) knowledge of experts (however defined).

Like Glaude (2017), Rogers (2009) understood that publics must push the state and its public institutions to reinvent democratic norms and policies. Given that these institutions will (often) resist this transformation, oppositional expressions are needed to communicate demands. The populist expressions of our racial reckoning represent the multiple oppositional movements at play. The role of the public sphere is, in a sense, to have an uneasy relationship to the state; multiple publics are pushing against the state institutions relative to institutional racism, justice, and inclusion. So, in this sense, Dewey's notion of democratic politics maps onto our current moment of racial reckoning, one fueled by populist expressions and multiple oppositional publics.

Governance is legitimate when it is informed and sometimes transformed by citizens organizing in public life. Rogers (2009) emphasized that Dewey (1927) saw the state as sometimes requiring adjustment and revision of values and structures. Our present racial reckoning is a struggle over a major revisioning of U.S. political and educational values, and Deweyan pragmatism understands this to be not an exception to but a part of democratic life as it changes and evolves over time. In this evolution, it is important that power is balanced between citizens and experts, including elected as well as appointed officials. "Dewey's view of democracy advanced here derives from his desire to manage power and prevent its use from becoming arbitrary . . . This complements and frames his understanding of the relationship between experts and citizens" (Rogers, 2009, p. 233). The processes by which the state, in the form of elected or appointed officials, might be transformed by citizens is always deliberative, for Dewey. Educational publics are, in this sense, temporary mobilizations of "the people" formed in the conflicts and problems that arise in schools, and which require deliberation and inquiry in order for the problems to be addressed and remedied by institutions.

As governing bodies in education attempt to listen and respond to populist demands, their task is to weigh facts, ask questions, evaluate data, judge implications, and listen to stakeholders and to experts—in other words, to deliberate. Deliberation in the pragmatist tradition refers to shared inquiry, acts of testing and weighing ideas, facts, and values with others. Rogers (2009) explained: "How citizens understand information is an issue about the ends to which they are moving as a political community, and this can emerge only through deliberation and not externally to that process" (p. 210). Deliberation, Rogers argued, "implies a kind of collective artisanship to social inquiry that draws on the specific experiences of individuals, facts about the problem in question, and potential risks of action" (p. 211). Inquiry and deliberation are attempts to resolve some differences of opinion based on testing opinions and beliefs by weighing evidence and sorting out how to weigh them: "Lay and expert knowledge gains whatever vitality it has from being forged through a deliberative process that makes each responsive to the other" (p. 212). These deliberations should be the site for sorting out facts from fictions, choosing truths and chosen values, rather than rumor and conspiracy theories. The conditions for good deliberation in local governance are, in the best of democratic times, not guaranteed. In current times of political crisis and post-truth politics (Lynch, 2019; Sant, 2021), good deliberation is increasingly difficult. Moreover, good deliberation regarding issues of racism in the U.S. face monumental challenges at all levels. School board meetings in recent years show how poorly our public institutions presently organize such deliberations (van Lier, 2021). Moreover, serious deliberation about race in U.S. society is something for which many are ill-prepared and about which there is much fear (DiAngelo, 2011; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Strolovitch, 1998). In addition to this fear, there is disagreement over basic facts, and there are those individuals and groups who use threat and fearmongering to gain political ground. Values, and our sense of our own national and racial identities, shape how we interpret racial facts. In matters of our present racial reckoning, educational or equity experts can point out facts related to race in education (e.g., discipline statistics, access to advanced coursework, quality of professional staff in schools), but our beliefs about what these facts mean or represent will be shaped by our own values and experiences. "Only when the facts are allowed free play for the suggestion

of new points of view is any significant conversion of conviction as to meaning possible" (Dewey, 1927, p. 3).

A pragmatist analysis of our political moment shows us the great irony of the present circumstance. Political power, in many types of expression including populist forms, helps shape and guide the educational values and priorities of a given community, consistent with Dewey's community-minded democratic vision for education (Dewey, 1916). These populist forms, in present times of racial reckoning, take the shape of multiple publics. "A democratic public sphere . . . and state is radically inclusive, even though such inclusiveness means the emergence of distinct and exclusive publics" (Rogers, 2009, p. 229). Multiple publics informing and shaping democratic governance in education is not new, not simply related to racial politics, and we would argue, not inherently a democratic crisis (Knight Abowitz, 2014). The irony is that populism is necessary to push social reform related to racism and schooling but also creates conditions where that reform is harder to create and complete, due to the distinct tasks and dispositions required in these two political processes. Populist movements make the expressions of divergent views more strident, more emotional, and much more polarized in both the content of disparate views and in the performance of those views in public meetings, online forums, and media (social and mainstream). In short, our populist moment makes deliberation more strained and challenging to navigate. We need populist expression to push the democratic state to act, to change, to reform in light of the racial revaluing revolution that is so essential to a new version of America as a narrative of democratic hope. Yet the rise of populist expression across the political spectrum in U.S. society makes the deliberative work of racial reckoning that much harder to construct. This is true for at least two reasons, language and emotion.

First, as we noted earlier, populist discourse is often colloquial and general, relying on empty signifiers to publicly demand solutions to so-called pinching problems. Functionally, this serves to coalesce diverse factions into a singular "people" advocating together against a perceived "elite," what we described previously as a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005). However, the danger of empty signifiers is that in their simplicity, they can elide facts and meaning that are essential to addressing the problem that animates the action of "the people." Such is the case with anti-CRT activism. CRT language is used by the right as an empty signifier to bring together those who have concerns about race, privilege, or oppression being discussed in schools. This is problematic because it obfuscates the real problem of racial inequality and because prior to its cooptation by the right, CRT was not empty for those on the left, who developed this theory to analyze and talk back to systemic racism and its perpetrators. By employing it as an empty signifier, "CRT" has become a dirty word in the public imagination, emphasizing political fault lines and triggering political tremors there, while making it more politically risky for scholars, teachers, and school leaders to use CRT and other theoretical tools to examine the real problem of racial revaluing in light of facts and reason. In pragmatist terms, this discursive framing saps the vitality from the racial inquiry and deliberation processes. Accordingly, anti-CRT language serves to perpetuate the racial

status quo in education and white supremacy, and anti-CRT legislation threatens to institutionalize it.

Second, inquiry and deliberation are fed by fundamentally different dispositions than populist expression. The latter, which is motivated by a perception of "the people" lacking something because of the actions of "the elite," generates hot emotion—indignation, anger, fear—to power its engines of demands to those in power. By contrast, inquiry and deliberation are fed by cooler practices such as listening, critical thinking, and engaging with those who have different viewpoints and values. These cooler practices are what Rogers (2009) referred to as conditions of "mutual responsiveness":

> *For Dewey, the emergence of moral life is coterminous with conditioning individuals for mutual responsiveness. As with dancing, for example, mutual responsiveness is what allows us to follow the movements of our partners from the perspectives on our own moves. Responsiveness thus means that moral life requires us to react appropriately to an experience of the world, its evidence, and objects that now call on our attention. (p. 149)*

Mutual responsiveness reminds us that political disagreements about race and policies or curriculum oriented toward racial justice in education are not simply political conflicts. They are deeply moral, as it relates to how we as U.S. political subjects, and how students in schooling spaces, interact and share lives. The impetus, the push to deliberate is fed by populist expressions, which are plentiful in this populist moment of our political life. Yet the work that we must ultimately do in the process of racial reckoning, one which helps us change some of our most damaging and harmful racial habits, is moral and deliberative.

Conclusion

Matthew Hindman (2020), in his recent work on populism and citizenship, has observed that "interest in populism now appears to be strongest among scholars who view it as a threat to democracy" (Urbinati, 2017, in Hindman, p. 23). Trends in democratic society around the globe show the presence and prevalence of authoritarian, nationalist, nativist and racist motivations for populist politics. Acknowledging this truth, we nevertheless agree with Hindman that "this view of populism overlooks the transformative potential of a robustly *democratic* populism" (p. 23). We see the populist politics unleashed and developed within the BLM movement to be potentially transformative, but only if correctly understood in terms of populism's role in provoking institutional responses consistent with principles of educational equity and justice.

In *Democracy in Black*, Glaude (2017) asserted that our present reckoning requires the work of re-storying the country: "We have to tell stories of those who put forward a more expansive conception of American democracy. This will involve confronting the ugly side of our history . . . sacrificing the comfort of national innocence and the willful blindness that comes with it" (p. 203). Education is a fundamental site of telling the stories of America, rehearsing and reinterpreting its myths, histories, and social values. In this paper, we argue that education governance is rightly pushed, in this populist moment, toward a revolution in racial

valuing. Many educators, students, and families are tuned in to the urgency of this present revolution for changing the habits and practices of teachers, administrators, and board members. Many of us feel the weight of the responsibility, which Floyd's death catalyzed in this generation. Populist expression by publics, formed around the problems of racism in public schools over generations, helps keep the urgency of that responsibility front and center in our attentions. This is populist expression that holds public institutions "to high standards of accountability, egalitarianism, and public virtue" (Hindman, 2020, p. 23).

Populist expression needs to spur inquiry and deliberation among education's governance bodies in order for that expression to yield its democratic potential. Rogers's (2009) interpretations have shown Deweyan democracy envisions publics as pushing the state to change, reform, or in some cases, remain steadfast to old values and practices. Education governance requires shared deliberation and inquiry, particularly at the local level, to accomplish the difficult tasks of racial revaluing. Because racial ideals are reproduced and embodied at the level of habits, language, curriculum, and school structures (e.g., discipline policies), racial revaluing in schools is inherently a local, bottom-up task of rebuilding, re-narrating our country's sense of itself as a multi-racial nation weighted with its own complex histories and unknown possibilities.

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