Social Foundations of Education and the Political Equilibrium

Fuad Al-Daraweesh, University of Toledo

Introduction

One of the most discernable qualities of American society is the contradiction it holds between its economic and political systems, namely, capitalism and democracy. Despite scholars’ efforts to reconcile both systems, the demands of both systems are incongruous with each other. Capitalism is driven by the logic of inequality, driven as it is by unequal accumulation of capital, and democracy is driven by the logic of equality, driven as it is by the normative claim of moral and political equality. Thus in order to maintain stability over time, it is imperative for the economic system to include a political element that mitigates inequality through various social, and educational institutions. The process of mitigation is important in containing significant conflict between unequal social groups that would destabilize the social system. In other words, a kind of political equilibrium is required in a democratic and capitalist society. In this paper, I shall argue that Social Foundations of Education (hereafter SFE) serves to maintain this political equilibrium. It will be argued that SFE is a contributing factor in the mitigation of inequality by recognizing the cultural political authority of economically and socially oppressed groups. The argument is premised on the idea that the scope and the content of SFE is to mitigate the harsh reality of inequality, and consequently promotes a certain conception of justice. This conception ought to cultivate a consensus on issues related justice. This conception influences significantly thinking about social institutions. Mitigating inequality is a neutralizer between unequal asymmetrical relations, which serve as a means to depoliticize, and consequently achieve a balance.

The argument is grounded in the work of Mannheim, Galtung, Foucault, and Tozer. However, further development for the concept is needed. The concept of equilibrium is applicable to SFE, as well as to other discourses. This paper is divided into two sections. In the first section, I seek to provide exegetical explanations of the scope, content, and role of the discipline, as it pertains to core elements constitutive of the formation of the meaning, and the content of equilibrium. The purpose of SFE is, among others, to study and thereby understand the complex and dynamic relationship between schooling and society including culture. SFE influences thinking about society and its social institutions. In dealing with social justice issues, SFE promotes fair and just social institutions which are characterized by a balance between unequal social groups. In the second section, Social Foundations of Education and the Political Equilibrium, I shall argue that the discipline serves as a tool, to balance the unequal social, political, and economic relations. This is achieved by disseminating information on the sociological, historical,
and philosophical foundations of education. In this process, educators and learners reflect on certain concept of justice, which includes, among others, discussing issues of race, class, gender, and age. This reflection is a recognition of the culture of oppressed social groups. Political equilibrium is a very important element, which preserves the continuity of history. The political balance is brought in to alleviate the gap between social groups, which are affected by inequality. Hence, it eases any potential conflict among social groups.

**Foundations of Education**

Foundations of Education is a discipline which provides a historical, philosophical, political, and sociological reflection on the relationship connecting education with sociology, culture, anthropology, politics, and economics. The discourse of the discipline developed in response to the need for educating teachers about crucial sociopolitical issues. As conceived by the contemporary field of education, the foundations of education are in place to “develop understanding of the theory behind the practice of teaching.” Teachers College, Columbia University, was the first, among American higher-education institutions, to develop a program in foundations of education. As a part of this program, Teachers College presented two directions for foundational studies. The first direction focused on the psychological foundations, which examined the nature of the human mind and learning processes. The second direction specialized in the social foundations, which “combined the other foundational areas into a cross-disciplinary approach, examining the social institutions, processes, and ideals underlying educational policy and practice.”

In 1940, a program in foundations of education was also under formation at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. With its dual categorization/directionality, the discipline of Foundations of Education studies the relationship between culture and mind, as reflected in the system of education. Although psychological foundations of education is an integral part of the discipline, in this paper I shall focus on one direction within educational foundations—SFE.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defined the term, proposed the vision of the purpose of study, and outlined a plan for the content and processes of SFE. According to NCATE, the term social foundations of education, “has a distinct institutional history, which refers first, to the cultural phenomena that underlie any society’s educational ideas and practices, and second, to the interdisciplinary field of study that was developed expressly to engage school practitioners in the study of cultural phenomena.” The drafters of this definition regarded the content of the discipline as dealing with historical issues related to such oppressive practices as, for example, racism and sexism. In other words, the term SFE covers a variety of issues in the institutional history, as well as cultural phenomena. Given this, SFE ought to assist teachers in constructing meaning more adequately in their practice as educational decision-makers. Teaching SFE is meant to provide students with techniques for constructing meaning, for example, constructing a new meaning of a cultural phenomenon after deconstructing the meaning it currently holds. As proposed by NCATE, the content and procedures of the social foundations of education include:

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6. Ibid.
Engaging students in studying the cultural dimensions of educational problems about which teachers may be called upon to make decisions in practice. These cultural dimensions of education are treated in scholarship in history, philosophy, and sociology of education, for example, as well as in comparative education; gender studies in education; and aesthetics, anthropology, economics, and politics of education.  

In other words, as a result of their studies of foundations of education, students should be able to make informed judgments about the aim and practice of education. The proposed content of SFE includes a broad interdisciplinary field, which deals with social, political, and economic problems that have a direct impact on education. Future teachers ought to recognize the relationship between economy and politics, both past and present, and be aware of the dominant ideology of the era in question, and its influence on meaning-construction in society. This recognition enables students to challenge oppressive ideologies that have a negative impact on the practice of education. These ideologies, although political in nature, are characterized by the disenfranchisement of some oppressed social groups in accessing economic resources.

Cultural literacy and communication claim importance in teacher education and in SFE. Both of the content and the scope constitute mechanisms for constructing a new meaning for certain cultural phenomena. These cultural phenomena include, among others, racism, ageism, homophobia, and sexism. Enlightened knowledge about these phenomena is an integral part of teachers’ preparation and future profession, since the competence of teachers to deal with these issues is intertwined with a certain commitment to ameliorate these ideologies. To this end, SFE strives to provide pre-service teachers with an appropriate background education to deal with these issues. This education constitutes an imperative for communication in a democracy through constructing new meanings of the aforementioned cultural phenomena. This is achieved by eliciting an awareness, which is based on communication. In addition, the discipline is built around the assumption that the majority of the American public appear to be unaware, or illiterate, of the above-mentioned cultural phenomena.


Hirsch defines cultural literacy as a set of concepts, ideas, and common knowledge that are prerequisite for constructive dialogue about persistent issues in the society. This dialogue is a pertinent part of social engagement in order to obtain a common, meaningful understanding of certain issues, which are a part of daily life. Hirsch explains, “the complex understandings of modern life depend on the co-operations of many people with different specialties in different places. Where communication fails, so do undertakings. The function of national literacy is to foster effective nationwide communications.” For Hirsch, communication is the rationale behind cultural literacy, and a common national language is the medium for such communication. Soltis’ argument points in the same direction, as he states, “Educators need to achieve high levels of inter-group literacy. They need to acquire the language and concepts of education, the background history, basic theoretical frameworks, central ideas, and common knowledge and traditions that give them the associative conceptual background that permits serious communication, dialogue, and debate as professionals.”

SFE provides theoretical concepts, ideas, and background for teachers to engage in a con-

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8. Ibid, 9.
10. Ibid, 2.
structive dialogue about crucial issues in society. Moreover, the discipline infuses teachers’ education with the knowledge to combat illiteracy manifested in the American society. Illiteracy is perceived as an expression of an unjust social reality that plagues society.

Communication is an effective tool for dealing with illiteracy, because communication engages community in a dialogue about social problems and, subsequently, encourages the resolution of those problems. The purpose of SFE in a democratic context includes pursuing educational and political consensus, on certain social issues, by establishing and sustaining comprehensive communication on those issues. This communication establishes and regulates a certain conception of justice. Communication is a tool for transforming undesirable social and cultural structures which undermine the full potential of human development. In a democracy, communication should be directed towards reaching informed consensus amongst the public, on the common good of the society, as a whole. Hence, this leads to a wider participation in social life, and facilitates the reach of overlapping goals, consistent with the society’s shared interests and values.

Communication is built on founding “communicative competence” in teachers: a factor necessary for renegotiating various aspects of cultural and social beliefs. Bowers claims, “Communicative competence can be understood as the outcome of being culturally literate.” Thus, communicative competence is premised on an understanding of the composition of the society, its political and economic inequality. This competence is characterized by a commitment to cultivate involvement in transforming the current social order. Such a competence should be directed towards rethinking the basic cultural assumptions, rather than passively accepting them; that is, towards “relativizing culture” or renegotiating new sociopolitical meanings. Communicative competence enables individuals to gain the luminal space, or the distance necessary, for critical reflection on the surrounding context. This idea is articulated elegantly by C. Bowers: “Our primary focus is on the tendencies within modernizing cultures to revitalize the conceptual foundations of culture and, in the process, give political power to those individuals and social groups who are able to exploit the luminal space by using language to create new conceptual basis for authority.” In other words, there should be a breakdown on the hold of cultural authority. In this context, Bowers seeks to transform cultural beliefs by delegitimizing the old cultural beliefs, and empowering the new ones through communicative competence, which is based on constructing a new paradigm of meanings for different cultural phenomena. This corresponds highly to the scope of the SFE in which equality is fought for, through providing luminal space to pre-service teachers to be involved in a search for a just and democratic society. The process results in a newly invented cultural authority in which marginalized groups have more weight, at least in theory. This process is carried out through the transformation of partial views on history and knowledge, to a more inclusive view of the world, which includes feminist, African American, and “other” marginalized groups’ voices. This process is conditioned by the “right balance between the potential of socialization to liberate and bind, so that the individual and society can grow in a manner that integrates the new with the positive aspects of the past.” This idea contributes to future teachers’ communicative competence. Moreover, it helps teachers to observe how language games, manifested in constructing new meanings, emerge, giving students an opportunity to renegotiate new meanings.

The content and the scope of SFE, which is based in constructing new meanings, provide students with alternative models of social reconstruction. In *Shifting the Center and Reconstructing Knowledge*, Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins maintain that there is a need to reconstruct knowledge.\(^\text{15}\) There are some groups in American society that have been marginalized from the dominant culture, and whose experiences have been deemed insignificant in the formation of history, society, and culture. “Shifting the center,” according to Anderson and Hill Collins, means reconsidering those experiences of marginalized groups that have been formerly excluded from the historical narrative, formed by Eurocentric patriarchy. Renegotiating new meanings to certain cultural phenomena contributes significantly to “shifting the center.” Consequently making subordinate people’s experiences the center of the new knowledge. The authors call for the cultural recognition of non-white male experiences along with the recognition of the dominant group’s experiences. The exclusion of marginalized group’s experiences means that their history, and culture is less important compared to the central dominant culture. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the dominated people’s experience in some way, in order to do justice to these people.

Without changing the center of the grand historical narrative, most of the aforementioned groups will remain “invisible.” Anderson and Hill Collins claim that the feminist movement, and women’s studies, have changed the dominant culture’s perspective of how, and what, we think about women and men, at the same time. Inclusive thinking enriches human knowledge and makes “the experience of previously excluded groups more visible and central in the construction of knowledge.”\(^\text{16}\) The reconstruction of the current model of knowledge is beneficial, say the authors, because this reconstruction will help students realize the “partiality” of their vision. In addition, perceiving the world from a single perspective could be dangerous because “incorrect knowledge gives us poor social analysis and leads to the formation of bad social policy that reproduces, rather than solves, social problems”\(^\text{17}\). Following, knowledge informs behaviors; thus, having inaccurate knowledge could lead to inappropriate behaviors. Overall, current forms of oppression in society are manifested by the inequality between the dominant group, and other groups who are marginalized because of age, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, region, and ethnicity. Challenging these forms of oppression requires the reconstruction of knowledge. It will be argued that constructing knowledge, shifting the center, rotating cultural authority holders, and negotiating new meanings of old oppressive ideologies contribute to maintaining equilibrium between unequal relations within a society, since this contributes to neutralizing explosive relationships between unequal groups. In this manner, oppressed people’s experience is recognized, validated, and entered into communication. This alleviates the suffering of oppressed groups, and consequently this process ameliorates any potential conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor.

**Social Foundations of Education and the Political Equilibrium**

Economic and political inequality has existed throughout history. There are different political, economic, and social approaches to the problem of inequality that have persisted since the creation of the first polis. These approaches range from attempts towards an equal economic re-

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17. Ibid.
distribution of property, to an acknowledgment of the importance of having unequal economic and political power relations in a society. In contemporary American history, SFE presumes a role in alleviating the political inequality. The discipline grounds the rationale of the mollification of unequal power sharing on the promise of the democratic ideal.

The political equilibrium is also a device in place to mitigate the harsh realities of inequality, in addition to its role in maintaining social cohesion, and preserving the integrity of the social order. In the political equilibrium stage, social injustice is not radically transformed over a short period of time, but rather it is a stage of normalization. In this stage, issues of social justice are explained, rationalized, presume a moral imperative, and then enter into communication for validation by the social group. The content of SFE is drawn from “multiple and uneven historical trajectories, from which the ideas and events of the present are constructed.” The uneven historical trajectories refer to the institutional practices and ideologies that have existed in the history of the United States. Those trajectories are manifested in issues, for example, of racism, sexism, gay and lesbian exclusion, ageism, and oppression in general. The role of the discipline of SFE is an effort to transform the uneven historical trajectories into even historical trajectories.

Transforming uneven historical trajectories contributes significantly to achieving a balance on thinking about any phenomena. Foucault explains that, “systems of thought are forms in which, during a given period of time, knowledges (Saviors), individualize, achieve equilibrium, and enter into communications.” SFE is a form of knowledge, which seeks to achieve a balance between unequal power relations, and consequently enter into communication as a neutralizer. The purpose of the discipline is to maintain equilibrium of certain phenomena, in this case, social injustice, as a prerequisite for other phenomena (here, social justice issues) to gain valid entry into communication. For example, any form of knowledge of slavery, as an institutionalized system, is often connected to its counterpart: the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, based on binary opposition of concepts, the counterpart of any phenomenon is the equalizer, which contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon. For example, sexism, as a form of knowledge, is rarely articulated without a reference to feminism, since it represents an extreme conceptual schema, which refers to inequality. Consequently this poses a threat to the social cohesion of the group. Thus, social injustice issues enter into communication in the light of social justice issues; and the latter are equalizers of the former, which form a balance between the oppositions of these ideologically constructed discourses.

The binary opposition that is representative in framing the understanding of social justice issues, for example sexism and feminism, becomes a conceptual schema for thinking about the issues. This conceptual schema represents a shift, at least in theory, from a negative old experience that is domesticated to a positive new experience. For example slavery and misogyny are both negative old phenomena that are domesticated to positive phenomena like the civil rights movement and feminism. Given the nature of enlightened society slavery and misogyny could not be articulated without their associations with new phenomena namely rights, and feminism. Since the latter is the equalizer of the former. Rights and feminism as two distinct movements are the neutralizers which depoliticize unequal relations.

According to Mannheim, this process is dialectical, in that “every age allows to arise (in differently located social groups) those ideas and values in which are contained in condensed

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20. Foucault, Ethics, (p. XI).
form the unrealized and unfulfilled tendencies which represent the needs of each age.”\textsuperscript{21} SFE informs the needs of the new era in the history of America. In this era, sexism, racism, and all other forms and practices are sought to be eliminated. Although this utopian ideal has not, yet, been realized, its presence in social thought is extremely crucial on two grounds: first, it is an impetus for the movement of history; second, it is the concept through which a state of equilibrium is achieved, since it offers any negative experience a positive counterpart to mollify the harsh realities of the former. Consequently maintaining a balance between both experiences is important in normalizing the idea of compensating the oppressed, and in preserving the cohesion of the social order.

History is perceived as a force buoyed by a dialectical process. From this point of view, “every historical event is an ever-renewed deliverance from a topia (existing order) by a utopia which arises out of it.”\textsuperscript{22} In this context, SFE pertains to utopian educational and social concepts which arise from the existing social order. For example, social justice arises out of social injustice. Thus, maintaining a delicate balance between topia and utopia is necessary to the articulation of history. Moreover, the balance is “organically and harmoniously integrated into the new characteristic of the period.”\textsuperscript{23} Within the discipline, the content of SFE is harmoniously integrated with democracy, which is the characteristic of the era. Hence, the road of history “leads from one topia over a utopia to the next topia, etc.”\textsuperscript{24} The absence of the utopian ideal is a threat to history, since “whenever utopia disappears, history ceases to be a process leading to an ultimate end.”\textsuperscript{25} (SFE guarantees the continuity of history, since the discipline necessitates the importance of the ideal of democracy and justice. In this context, SFE accentuates transforming a topia into a utopia.

Utopian ideal is a core component of the political equilibrium. The aim of the political balance, in addition to articulating history, in essence, is to mitigate the gap between the polarities, which ultimately would achieve a unity in the society and prevent absolute hegemony of one class over the other. This mechanism, in effect, produces a political regime that is not characterized by a master-slave relationship, which would be antithetical to the ideal of democracy. Imbalance or disequilibrated social relations “would create unequal relations of social and political power and that would lead to social and political fragmentation and the subordination of the public good to the interests of the few.”\textsuperscript{26} The absence of the political equilibrium is a threat to the social order, since it destabilizes the harmonious relationships among individuals within the political community.

Social aggression and violence occur when there is a state of disequilibrium between social groups. This aggression, based on systematic stratification, is perceived as a possible way out of the frustrating situation. Galtung introduces two different categories of classes: “Topdog” and “Underdog.”\textsuperscript{27} Topdog includes all privileged classes; underdog represents unprivileged ones. The distance between the two “can be reduced, the consequences of stratification can be alleviated, but it cannot be declared to be non-existent.”\textsuperscript{28} The discipline of SFE contributes to alleviating the distance between these oppositions. Such alleviation would function as a political

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 178.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 179.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 178.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 277.
\textsuperscript{26} Michael Thompson, \textit{The Politics of Inequality} (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007), 16.
\textsuperscript{27} Galtung, “A structural theory of aggression,” 97 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 96.
balance and would fit the context of a democratic society. There are techniques through which a state of equilibrium is achieved. These techniques include: “making an element that is low in one context high in another context (compensation) or [by] letting individuals who have high ranks in one period have low ranks in the next period (rotation).”

SFE compensates the oppressed groups (due to race, sex, gender, disability, or class) by recognizing the sufferings (presented in the merging cultures of oppression and injustice) that the oppressed have endured. In addition, this compensation constitutes a rotation of the variables, since it delegitimizes the center, and shifts it to a new center, in this case oppressed groups’ experience.

This reconstruction of knowledge through compensation and rotation ultimately leads to a shifting of the center. The rotation of the variables is represented by the shift from Eurocentric views to the “other” views, with regard to the construction of knowledge and history. This construction is manifested in a shift from negative knowledge on race to a new positive theoretical framework, which explains the idea of race. The same is applicable to the oppression of women, which is shifted to a new construction of knowledge about women based on feminism. Shifting the center is characterized by moral and authentic authority of the oppressed groups to narrate their history. In this manner, for example, the feminist movement becomes empowered to narrate women’s history. The new form of knowledge is characterized by self-righteousness, according to Galtung.

The oppressed groups’ experience forms a solid moral ground to contest their historical oppression. This background also serves as a right to compensation, because “claims must be justified not only in the eyes of the others but also in the eyes of the claimants themselves; they must feel they are right to the point of self-righteousness.”

Rotation and compensation can only be achieved if there is a reservoir of neutrals that can be brought in as mediators to dampen any conflict. The neutrals range from the literature of social injustice issues, which have claimed the form of the new knowledge, to the moral obligation to eliminate the representation/elements of social injustice from teacher education. Neutrals are important components in tapering off the conflict between the dominant culture and the dominated culture, consequently a state of disequilibrium is avoided.

Galtung defines disequilibrium as “differential treatment,” in other words, the term refers to inequality. Thus, such ideologies as racism, sexism, and classism are perfect examples of disequilibrium because they are all based on differential treatment. In order to maintain a state of equilibrium, there is a need for developing an ideology of rectification. Galtung notes: “An ideology of rectification has to be fully developed, or even perceived at all—only that the objective existence of disequilibrium will cause an instability in the life-style of the person or the nation, and cause what is often referred to as an ‘unstable self-image.’”

The ideology of rectification is the political balance between extremes. The purpose of the ideology is to preserve national stability. The “unstable self-image” is an unpredictable social variable which poses a threat to the social order. Thus, it is necessary to contain the unstable self-image through providing possible alternatives. Those possibilities make the unpredictable more predictable through drawing boarders of containment in which subjectivity thrives, especially within a democratic context. Within a democratic society, it is inevitable for any disequilibrium at one point, to reach equilibrium at a different juncture. Galtung suggests, “It is socially guaranteed by the very structure of the system, that the disequilibrated is never left in peace with his disequilibrium unless he cuts

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid, 100.
32. Ibid, 99.
33. Ibid.
out and closes down some interaction channels." Since disequilibrium is motivated by self-righteousness, and internally justified in its actions, it becomes crucial to equilibrate unequal relations.

**Concluding Remarks**

The existence of the political equilibrium makes possible the coexistence of two diametrically opposed systems: democracy and capitalism. Tozer, Senese, and Violas suggest three frameworks for understanding the relationship between American society and its public schools: political economy, ideology, and schooling. According to Tozer, Senese and Violas, “any significant change or disturbance in one of [the frameworks] will set off a ripple effect through the others until a new state of equilibrium is achieved.” Therefore, a balance is required, between those three frameworks, for the system to maintain itself. Thus, it is not surprising that American education develops in close correlation with the political economy, and the ideology of the era. Education in the United States has been “the chosen instrument of social reformers.” The realities of the capitalist system necessitate social and political reforms utilizing education as means towards that end. The goals of the reforms were to alleviate the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged. Since “education helps defuse and depoliticize the potentially explosive class relations of the production process,” Thus SFE contributes significantly to alleviating the gap between asymmetrical power relations, and consequently maintaining the political equilibrium. Maintaining equilibrium is achieved through using various techniques, which include, but are not limited to, compensating the oppressed groups, or rotating cultural authority holders. These techniques involve shifting the center and negotiating new meanings of old phenomena. Although the political equilibrium is an essential prerequisite for any democratic system, it ought not to be sought as an end in itself. SFE is in grave need for new conceptual boundaries to include more ambitious projects consistent with democracy and the challenges ahead.

**Bibliography**


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34. Ibid, 100.
37. Ibid, 11.


**Fuad Al-Daraweesh,** Ph.D, is a research fellow of the Center for Nonviolence and Democratic Education at Judith Herb College of Education at the University of Toledo. He earned his degree from the University of Toledo majoring in Philosophy of Education.