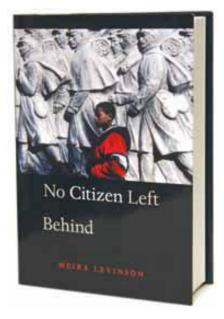Ideologically Misframing the Civic Empowerment Gap: An Essay Review

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Meira Levinson's book *No Citizen Left Behind* will be considered a classic within the civic education literature because it is

thoughtful, well-argued, and accessible to a larger audience. I, however, found the book both peculiar and incomplete. On one hand, the book is conceptually rich, well written, thoughtful, and layered with personal anecdotes which brings to life the author's philosophical arguments—a feat few philosophical books accomplish. On the other hand, however, the book has an ideological vision of civic empowerment, which leads Levinson to systematically misdiagnose the problem she set out to address: the civic empowerment gap. I argue Levinson's book is peculiar and incomplete because she ideologically misframes the civic empowerment gap as a problem of multiculturalism, and as a result she inadequately explains the type of civic education needed to challenge the class aspect of this gap—which her evidence showed was the initial problem behind the gap in the first place.

Calling someone's argument ideological is a heavy accusation, and even tougher to defend in a short essay review; but, to justify my criticism I shall review *No Citizen Left Behind* in an unconventional manner.

First, I will briefly explain how ideology is reproduced within what Nancy Fraser terms "the postsocialist condition" and the ideological practice of culturalizing politics. Second, I will explain the general argument of Levinson's book; noting my minor criticisms. Finally, I will tie our discussions together by explaining how and why Levinson reproduces the ideological practice of "culturalizing politics".

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In this section I focus on three questions: What is ideology? What role does ideology play in decoupling recognition from redistribution? And, what does it mean to the culturalization of politics? Answering these three questions will better frame my argument that Levinson ideologically misframes the civic empowerment gap.

First of all, I use the term ideology in the pejorative sense to mean the ways in which various forms of symbolic meanings (e.g. beliefs, habits, attitudes, or dispositions) operate to establish and sustain relations of domination (Thompson, 1990, p. 57). Ideology can occur in multiple ways and can be an unintentional act. Thus individuals who reproduce ideological practices are not always deliberately doing so. Nevertheless, ideological practices operate when a system of beliefs systemically conceals, distorts, or displaces issues which should be addressed, and as a result various forms of domination are reproduced.

Within the postsocialist condition one way ideology is reproduced is by decoupling the politics of redistribution from recognition. The decoupling of redistribution from recognition becomes ideological when certain issues get systematically misframed within the wrong political discourse, and as a result, issues become distorted, concealed, or displaced. In our case, the issue being misframed is the civic empowerment gap. As Nancy Fraser (1997) explains, "the postsocialist condition" is marked by a series of symptoms affecting leftist/progressive thinking and political practices; and a key impetus behind these symptoms is a lack of vision and viable alternatives to capitalist democracies. Fraser goes on to argue that one of the symptoms marking the postsocialist condition is the shifting of political discourse to culture and away from redistribution. And the shift in political discourse becomes ideological when cultural concerns unreasonably overshadow structural and class issues, and

as a result class domination is reproduced (See Ray & Sayer, 1999).

As I shall explain shortly, Levinson makes this ideological shift when she misframes the civic empowerment gap as a problem of multiculturalism, despite her evidence illustrating that the gap is a class problem. In the meantime, I need to explain the connection between ideology and the decoupling of redistribution from recognition. One way class domination is reproduced within the postsocialist condition is by misframing social issues (Fraser, 2008, pp. 12–30). The treatment of poverty within the United States is a good example of misframing. Wealth and income inequalities continue to grow in the United States: According to Inequality.org, in 2007 the richest 1% of Americans owned 34.6% of the country's wealth; while the next 19% of the American population owned 50.5% of the country's wealth. Conversely the bottom 80% of the American population owns only 7% of the country's wealth (Inequality.org, 2011a). From 1967 to 2008, the average American households saw their earnings increase about 25%; however, the household income of the richest 5% increased by 68%. More astonishing, the top 1 percent of American households saw their income increase by 323% (Inequality.org, 2011b). However, within the United States poverty is often viewed as a personal or cultural problem, rather than a structural problem (See Wright & Rogers, 2010). When poverty is systematically misframed as a cultural problem the structural issues associated with the politics of redistribution become

distorted, which in turn reproduces class domination.

My general point is the shift in discourse is what Fraser means by ideologically decoupling the politics of recognition from the politics of redistribution. In other words, within our current social condition—the postsocialist condition—we are witnessing issues of injustices being framed almost exclusively within the language of recognition rather than within the discourse of *both* recognition and redistribution. Even more problematic are issues which ought to be framed within the language of redistribution being systematically misframed within the language of recognition. When this occurs, forms of class domination are reproduced because they are either dismissed or addressed in the wrong manner.

For clarity, I shall term Levinson's ideological misframing of the civic empowerment gap *the problem of culturalizing politics*. As Wendy Brown (2008) argues, *the culturalization of politics* occurs when structural issues—in our case, class politics—either disappear from or become so distorted within political discussions that structural problems are systematically misinterpreted as cultural problems. I argue Levinson engages in the ideological practice of *culturalizing politics* because she systemically misframes civic empowerment as an issue pertaining almost solely to "quandaries of multiculturalism", to quote Levinson, despite her own evidence showing that the civic empowerment gap is primarily a class problem. As a result,

Levinson reproduces class domination by treating a class problem primarily as a cultural problem. To justify this claim, I will proceed to my review of her book.

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No Citizen Left Behind opens by detailing what Levinson's terms "the civic empowerment gap", which is the divide between those who participate in politics and those who do not. Levinson provides an array of statistics and vignettes detailing the structural connection between inequalities in wealth and income and participation in politics. One of the many shocking facts she notes is: "People who earn over $75,000 annually are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of people who earn under $15,000, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, participation in protests, or contacting elected officials" (p. 34). Furthermore, quoting Larry Bartels, Levinson correctly argues that we ought to care about the citizen empowerment gap because:

> …political influence seems to be limited entirely to affluent and middle-class people. The opinions of the millions of ordinary citizens in the bottom third of the income distribution have *no* discernible impact on the behavior of their elected representatives. (p. 49)

The underlining issue behind the civic empowerment gap is that individuals and families within the upper two-thirds of the

income bracket are more likely to participate in politics than the bottom one-third. And even more problematically, the political system is skewed to disproportionally benefit individuals and families within the top one-third of the income bracket.

After empirically describing the civic empowerment gap, Levinson provides a broad definition of citizenship. While I find her broad definition of citizenship justifiable I have concerns with how she utilizes this definition. First of all, Levinson claims that "civic education should help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives" (p. 43).[1] Furthermore she argues, political actions include, but are not limited to, membership in political parties, campaign donations, voting, participation in protests, and contacting election officials. Her justifications for a broad definition of civic education are twofold: First, to highlight the diverse ways individuals can become politically active. Second, to note that "traditional forms of engagement still matter with respect to empowerment"; thus, a civic education must teach marginalized youth how to effectively engage in traditional politics. I have concerns with how she mobilizes a broad definition of citizenship

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[1] There are four subsets to this definition where Levinson explains what she means by competent and responsible. These are neither germane to my argument nor do they play an essential role in Levinson's overall argument.

because it leads the reader to assume the current political structure can adequately address the democratic demands of marginalized youth. I will expand upon this concern in the next section.

In Chapter 2, entitled "At School I Talk Straight": Race Talk and Civic Empowerment", Levinson quickly turns her attention to the issue of race, where she addresses the politics of codeswitching. Here Levinson carefully avoids the common assimilationist approach to codeswitching, which assumes people of color ought to learn "the language of power" simply because it is the language of power. Instead, she proposes a constructivist approach which entails respecting the linguistic abilities of students of color, yet teaching them how to speak to and challenge power. As she correctly notes, teachers should respect the linguistic diversity of students of color, but teach them how "…to represent and express themselves in ways that members of the majority group—those with political privilege and power—will naturally understand and respect" (p. 87). I found this chapter illuminating, engaging, and compelling. Levinson accurately captures the problem of codeswitching by noting why education has a responsibility to respect the linguistic diversity of students while also ensuring students can effectively communicate their demands within the democratic process.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the role of social studies and/or history in reducing the civic empowerment gap; specifically focusing on historical counternarratives (chapter 3) and

civic heroes (chapter 4). Her general argument is that a historical understanding of stories about struggle, opportunity, and obligation are essential to an empowering education—specifically for marginalized youth of color—because they are stories rooted in a tradition of action providing examples of how oppressed groups have overcome injustices. According to Levinson, civic heroes serve a similar purpose as counternarratives insofar as they provide students with "modes of emulation" which, as Levinson argues, impart "…the values that define the country in general". By this she means civic heroes can be used to "…expand our sense of what is possible for all humanity" (p. 149).

I found these two chapters troublesome for two reasons. In general, Levinson fails to explain 1) how to identify morally worthwhile counternarratives and 2) the process for constructing morally empowering civic narratives which deepen democracy. For example, by definition, counternarratives operate in opposition to dominant narratives. However, Levinson's argument implies that all counternarratives are morally worthwhile, which is not true. In addition, we cannot assume those who are oppressed or marginalized will construct morally worthwhile counternarratives—another assumption Levinson implicitly makes. Rather than philosophically explaining how to distinguish between civic narratives that promote civic participation but weaken democracy (e.g. the civic narratives against gay rights) and civic narratives promoting participation and deepen democracy (e.g. civic narratives for

racial justice), Levinson provides case studies of individuals who claim civic narratives were essential for why they personally became civically engaged. While these case studies are interesting, they only explain *that* civic narratives played an essential role in civic empowerment. What is needed—especially for teaching civic engagement—is a discussion on *how* to identify and construct morally worthwhile counternarratives.

Chapters 5 and 6 are conceptually rich and well-worth the read because they are practical for teachers, provide good examples of action civics, and the philosophical arguments are accessible to a wide audience. In addition chapters 5 and 6 offer a rich theoretical framework detailing ways in which teachers and schools can create an educational ethos that embodies civic action. These chapters describe both the value of creating an educational ethos which embodies civic virtues (Chapter 5) and the ways schools can make civic education "real" within schools (Chapter 6). As Levinson correctly notes, "schools need to exemplify the civic world that students have 'never seen'" (p. 185); and in doing so, schools "…need to create model civic spaces for young people, and give students opportunities to develop and practice empowerment skills, habits, attitudes" (p. 185). To create this environment, Levinson argues for an "action civics" curriculum, which is defined as "an engaged citizenry capable of effective participation in the political process, in their communities and in their larger society."

In Chapter 7, Levinson discusses the limitations of enacting an action civics curriculum within an educational climate dominated by accountability. Levinson addresses the "public role" educational accountability should have within a democracy, as well as how educational standards can be used to improve civic education. However, she quickly points out how the current accountability regimes limit schools and educator's abilities to implement an action civic curriculum. This chapter is insightful but does not offer anything new for those familiar with the debates around the current accountability regimes. In addition, I think her discussion on accountability would have been enriched had she addressed the relationship between neoliberalism and the educational accountability regimes (See Apple, 2006, pp. 29–49). Highlighting the relationship between neoliberalism and educational accountability regimes would also clarify the structural limitations educators, administers, and policy-makers face if they attempted to implement an action civics curriculum. Levinson's neglect of these structural issues leads into my larger critique of her book.

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So, what is the connection between the ideological decoupling of redistribution from recognition and misframing of the civic empowerment gap? And, how does Levinson culturalize politics by misframing the civic empowerment gap? Recall in Chapter 1 Levinson describes the civic empowerment gap as a gap between the "haves" and "have nots": the middle and upper-class have more influence in politics than the poor. In this regard, the civic empowerment gap is *primarily* a class problem (i.e. a problem with the politics of redistribution), and only *secondarily* a gap in cultural issues (i.e. an problem with the politics of recognition). However, Levinson frames—better yet, misframes—the civic empowerment gap in the cultural domain by placing her discussion exclusively within what she terms "quandaries of multiculturalism" (p. 17).

I am not sure why Levinson places the discussion of civic empowerment within the discourse of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the misframing of the civic empowerment gap is ideological because it reproduces the belief that class and structural problems can be addressed by simply changing an individual's culture. In other words, this misframing culturalizes politics. To reiterate my argument from Section I: the displacement of class-based politics is epidemic within the postsocialist condition, which entails the decoupling of recognition from redistribution. One way in which recognition and redistribution are ideologically decoupled is by displacing class politics. This ideological displacement was termed *culturalizing politics*, which, in our case, occurs when structural issues (read as: class) either disappear from or become so distorted within our political discussions that the structural problems are being systematically presented as a cultural problems.

Levinson reproduces the ideological practice of culturalizing politics in two ways: 1) she decouples the politics of recognition from redistribution by shifting the discussion of civic empowerment solely into the discourse of multiculturalism, when in fact civic empowerment is more about class than multiculturalism; 2) by making this illegitimate shift she treats empowerment almost exclusively as a cultural problem, and thus fails to provide a sustained discussion on the type of civic education needed to address the class aspect of the civic empowerment gap.

To illustrate my point, picture the following hypothetical situation. Imagine an actual inclusive democratic process where marginalized communities were provided a genuinely equal opportunity to deliberate over the type of civic education they want their children to receive. Now, this hypothetical deliberative process presents individuals with the same evidence Levinson presents in Chapter 1. What type of civic education would we expect a reasonable deliberative process to construct? I can assume this hypothetical democratic body *would not* develop a curriculum *only* focused on issues of multiculturalism. In fact, the deliberative process would have gone awry if the curriculum developed only focused on race and/or culture because the evidence behind the civic empowerment gap requires a class based curriculum—or at least, a civic education addressing both class and culture.

By misframing the civic empowerment gap within the discourse of recognition,

Levinson brushes over the issue of power; especially the structural power relationships tied to class domination. There are times in which Levinson notes the importance of having children talk to and challenge power; the problem is her conception of power is vague and she neglects the political economy. For example, Levinson argues:

> Minority civic empowerment must be about more than individuals' mastering the language of power and gaining internal access to the halls of power as they are currently structured. Groups also need to master strategies for amassing and deploying collective power…so as to change the political opportunity structure (p. 92).

Here Levinson notes power but never defines "the political opportunity structures" or "power." As a result, she is unclear as to which power relationships are preventing marginalized and oppressed communities from having an equal opportunity within the political structure. Consequently, she is unclear about what it means to challenge class domination

Second, by misframing civic empowerment as a minority issue, she overlooks the ways in which class domination affects the majority of Americans. For instance, individuals and families who occupy the top 10% of the income bracket are only 20% of the American population; and this is the group which wields the most political power. This means the civic empowerment gap is not a "minority issue" it is a "majority issue": The majority of citizens within the

United States live under a "civic oligarchy", wherein a small group of wealthy individuals dominate the political landscape (Winters, 2011, pp. 207–72). Thus, if class is the primary cause behind the civic empowerment gap—as her evidence illustrates—then her main questions should have been: How does capitalism limit an individual's opportunity to equally participate within the political opportunity structures? What, if anything, makes capitalism compatible with democracy? What does a civic empowerment education look like for the 80% of Americans who are systematically marginalized in the democratic process?

By neglecting the politics of redistribution, Levinson's book ultimately faces three major shortcomings. First, by misframing the civic empowerment gap as a "minority problem" Levinson inadequately depicts the problem of civic empowerment. As William Julius Wilson argues, in order to "bridge the racial divide" we need to build democratically structured and multicultural social movements aimed at challenging the structural factors preventing the *majority* of Americans from having an equal and fair opportunity within the democratic process (Wilson, 2001). Thus, by leaving the discussion within the politics of recognition, Levinson sidesteps the type of civic education needed to create multicultural coalition movements which address both recognition and redistribution.

Second, as I noted above, Levinson mobilizes her broader definition of civic education awkwardly by under-addressing

structural issues. For example, civic empowerment provides individuals with the capacities to challenge and change the current structure of political arrangements. In this sense, we cannot assume "traditional politics" alone are sufficient for civic empowerment. In other words, if the current political and economic structures are part of the problem, then an "empowering" education *must* clarify the "non-traditional" forms of politics available to those who are marginalized within our society. To clarify these "non-traditional" forms of politics Levinson would have benefited from grounding her concept of civic education within a sociological conception of civic society; doing so would clarify why social movements are the most effective "non-traditional" means available to marginalized and oppressed groups for reshaping the civic sphere in a more democratic manner (See Alexander, 2008; Cohen & Arato, 1994; Keane, 1984; Somers, 2008). Simply put, to empower youth to "soar in a world they have never seen", to quote Levinson, we need to teach students about the structural factors preventing them from soaring in the first place. In addition, we must teach students, especially marginalized youth, about feasible means for radically transforming the status quo (Author, 2012).

Third, by neglecting the politics of redistribution Levinson evades key questions any civic education must address, such as: If the current political opportunity structures are unable to empower the majority of citizens, what type of society is most likely to uphold the principles of democracy? More specifically, what type of

economic system is best suited to advance the principles of democracy? Now, I am not making the reductionist argument that all injustices are class injustices or that by changing the economic system we would address *all* the problems behind the civic empowerment gap. Rather, I am making the modest claim that we cannot talk honestly about civic education unless we are willing to sincerely discuss the economic system most likely to advance the principles of democracy. Moreover, we must teach children how to create the economic system which both deepens democracy and maximizes human flourishing—and clearly our current economic arrangements fail to achieve these tasks.[2]

In the end, Levinson's argument is ideologically driven because she systematically misframes the civic empowerment gap as a cultural or racial problem, when her evidence shows the gap is a class problem. Thus, by misframing the civic empowerment gap Levinson ideologically displaces the politics of redistribution, which in turn paints the picture that changing one's culture dispositions is sufficient for challenging class domination. This is a culturalized picture of politics because class domination is a structural issue requiring radical social change. To avoid culturalizing politics, Levinson would have needed to explain the type of civic education needed to radically

transform both the politics of recognition and redistribution.

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[2] I believe this society is a deep socialist democracy. However, I shall leave this discussion of another time. For my position on this see (Wright, 2010).

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