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The Fall and Rise of the Public in Public Education: From Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas

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What makes a public and what meaning do theories of the public hold for public education? This paper takes up the work of two philosophers, Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, to argue that how the public is theorized is consequential for situating public education. The article begins with a brief overview of the U.S. federal education policy in terms of its neoliberalization of public education. I then consider Arendt's theory of the public as a response to this policy discourse to argue that Arendt's public results in the rise of the social at the expense of the public. I then highlight Habermas's theory that maintains an opening for the public structured by its critical role. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of philosophy of education for continuing to conceptualize the public of public education.

Public, as a topic, is a rich ground for debate regarding its meaning and location. Guiding questions pertaining to public range from and combine the existential, is there a public? To the aesthetic, what does a public look like? To the historical, when was there a public? To the moral, what should a public be? Even this broad range of questioning does not cover the wide scope of inquiry revolving around publics and "counter-publics" (see, e.g., Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2010). I enter and focus this debate on the uses and difficulties of public as it pertains to public education. Specifically, what follows for education when different theories of the public are attached to it? And, alternately, in what ways is the public currently defined by federal education policy in the US? In asking these questions, I am limiting my focus to three main claims: (a) public schools as understood and controlled by federal government policy maintain a neoliberal stance that fashions public schools as a part of the free market; (b) the recent uptake in philosophy of education of Hannah Arendt's theory of the public as framing public schools differently from policy discourses that designate schools as failing, unwittingly serves to reinscribe schools in a narrative of decline consonant with those policy discourses claiming that public schools are failing; and (c) Jürgen Habermas offers a theory of the public that, understood heuristically, places the public of public education in a dialectical, rather than a fatal, narrative. To clarify my position on these claims, I am critical of the neoliberalization of public education, and while a vast body of research exists to support such a critique, some of which appears below, this article begins from the standpoint that neoliberalization has been successful in using federal, state, and district education policy to render schools into markets (Carusi, 2021). Rather than further rehearse the many well-made critiques of neoliberalism, this article considers how different philosophers of the public, viz. Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, position education as more and less accommodating of neoliberalization. As such, the

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article takes as given the undesirability of neoliberalism for conceiving public education. What I hope to offer here, then, is an example of the stakes of theorizing the public in public education. To the degree that the conceptualization of the public determines what public education is and does, philosophy of education is a primary site for this work to continue to be done.

Neoliberal Policies of Public Education

In order to address the recent focus of theorizing the public of public education, it will be helpful to contextualize what philosophers of education are responding to in the first place. With this in mind, I provide here a very brief history of the influence of neoliberalism on educational policy. While the U.S. Constitution says nothing about education, thus leaving the responsibility of its oversight for individual states to maintain, the federal government has had a lasting effect on the day-to-day activities of public school personnel and students, even in light of recent federal efforts to close the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) (To terminate the Department of Education, 2025). This is not to say that federal involvement in public schooling is necessarily undesirable, but the ways their involvement shapes the public school system on a national scale is important to contextualize what comes of such involvement. As will become clear from my argument below, the ways that federal education policies have framed the functions and purposes of public schooling stem from the neoliberal ideology of the free market.

The role of neoliberalism in education policy and practice has an extensive, critical literature.[1] As an ideology, neoliberalism in education maintains "that the invisible hand of the market will inexorably lead to better schools" (Apple, 2004, p. 18). How neoliberal logic makes this connection between the market and better schools takes several steps. First, the market must be understood as a neutral entity, open to all individuals regardless of race, gender, ability, or creed. These individuals are all equally capable of making rational decisions based on the information equally available to everyone from the market and the attainment of information is a positive, measurable feature of the individual. Thus, all that remains in achieving the gains the market offers individuals is exerting the work necessary to attain them. As Apple (2004) continues, "markets and the guarantee of rewards for effort and merit are to be coupled together to produce 'neutral,' yet positive results" (p. 18). These three things, neutrality, measurability, and rewarded effort, work together to produce a neoliberal vision of education. As is described in more detail in what follows, federal policy for public education in the United States considers students as future workers in the globally competitive marketplace. This goal is sought after through an accountability scheme based on supposedly neutral measurements of knowledge in the form of standardized test scores. And, through current policy measures, public schools are conceived as enterprises which, if they fail to serve the market of students and parents, are closed for business.[2] In order to ground the above summary, I explore the historical growth of neoliberalism in educational policy. The rhetoric of neoliberalism in education grew dramatically during the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan. Education was specifically influenced by the Reagan administration in a number of ways. In an effort to reduce government regulation, Reagan vowed to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education. This effort proved unsuccessful, though it may yet occur in 2026 if House Resolution 899 (To terminate the Department of

[1] Demonstrating the broad scope of critical research done on educational policy, schools, and neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this article, but the following sources at least sketch the breadth, depth, and duration of the literature on these topics: Apple (2004), Apple (2017), Boyles (1998), Jones and Ball (2023), and Molnar (2005).

[2] This conceptualization of public schools as free markets falls apart quickly when we take the compulsory status of public education into account, i.e., the legal requirement that children attend school undermines the "freedom to choose" upon which free markets function. While neoliberal voucher programs allow parents to choose different schools, that children attend school is not among the choices presented. Moreover, questions about who the customer is (students? parents? nations?) and what product is on offer (educated student? teacher labor? school facilities?) further derail attempts to map neoliberal logic onto public education.

Education, 2025) passes. However, convened in 1981 at the behest of President Reagan by the Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) released its report, *A Nation at Risk* (*ANR*) in 1983. The popularity of this report is attested to by the educational historian Joseph Newman (1990/2006) who calls the report "*the* educational document of the late twentieth century" (p. 352). The report famously warns that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). The threats were being realized through the global market in that "our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). Competition was found in the efficiency of Japanese automobile manufacturing, South Korean steel mills, and German tools. And the cause of the United States' losing economic ground to these other nations was located in the public schools. The report lists thirteen educational indicators of risk, focusing on low literacy rates, standardized test scores, and complaints from business and military leaders about the workers they receive from public schools.

This report marks a pivotal point in the federal government's involvement in public schooling, because it establishes a commonsense link between public schooling and the economic success of the United States. As the report states, "the public understands the primary importance of education as the foundation for a satisfying life, an enlightened and civil society, a strong economy, and a secure Nation" (NCEE, 1983, p. 17). Simply put, everyone knows that if public schools persist in their "mediocrity," the United States cannot compete in the global market.

Following Reagan's presidency, George H. Bush relied on the momentum of *ANR* to drive much of his administration's educational policy. Bush convened the governors of the United States for the Education Summit Conference (ESC) in 1989. His reasoning, familiar to readers of the report, was to protect "the very leadership position of America in the next century" from an inadequate public school system (Fiske, 1989, p. B19). With this concern in mind, the ESC issued a call for national goals for education (Bush, 1989). The goals were to "guarantee that we [the United States] are internationally competitive" in several areas, such as "the performance of students on international achievement tests, especially in math and science" and "the level of training necessary to guarantee a competitive workforce" (Bush, 1989).

In April of 1991, Bush announced the America 2000 strategy which established in policy what *ANR* and the ESC had recommended. In a National Address, President Bush (1991) announced:

> By 2000, we've got to, first, ensure that every child starts school ready to learn; second one, raise the high school graduation rate to 90 percent; the third one, ensure that each American student leaving the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades can demonstrate competence in core subjects; four, *make our students first in the world in math and science achievements* [emphasis added]; fifth, ensure that every American adult is literate and has *the skills necessary to compete in a global economy* [emphasis added] and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and sixth, liberate every American school from drugs and violence so that schools encourage learning.

The competitive edge is stressed both in subject matter, math and science specifically, as well as the global economy, again reinforcing the link between public schooling and national economic success. While the rhetoric of America 2000 was able to ride on the momentum created by *ANR*, as legislation it ultimately died in Congress.[3] Because Bush lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton, any second term plans he had for education reform were precluded. But, with Clinton, the link between education and economy persisted.

[3] For further reading on the rise and fall of America 2000 as legislation, see *Phi Delta Kappan* (Gough, 1991). This issue contains four different evaluations of Bush's plan, providing detailed contexts of different issues working for and against its passage.

President Clinton set his education agenda early by submitting his Goals 2000 education plan. As governor of Arkansas, Clinton co-hosted the ESC with Bush and his Goals 2000 plan did not stray far from what the ESC had established and what Bush attempted to implement. Clinton, however, was successful in moving his plan into law. In February of 1994, Congress passed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and Clinton signed it into law the following month. This act was comprised of the same six goals of Bush's America 2000 proposal, cited above, with the addition of two more goals regarding continuing education for teachers and increasing parental involvement (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994).

In its 1996 revision, this policy established a competitive framework for district-based allocation of federal funding. Keeping in mind the neoliberal emphasis on competition in the free market, this policy stated, "largely through State awards that are distributed on a competitive basis to local school districts, Goals 2000 promotes education reform in every State and thousands of districts and schools" (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1998, p. i). In fact, the law mandates that "at least 90 percent of each State's Goals 2000 allocation is awarded to local districts through a competitive subgrant process. In a few States, that rate is near 99 percent" (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1998, p. 10). Here we can locate a major shift in the federal government's influence on public schooling. With an increase in federal level funding, the Goals 2000 Act also required the school districts to compete for the grants issued to individual states. This particular approach not only neglects pre-existing disparities in funding allocation across districts, but it also reinforces such disparity through a competitive model of distribution. Several examples of different states' adherence to the Act are given in the Goals 2000 report, such as the case of Louisiana where:

> Goals 2000 has facilitated the development of State content standards (approved in January 1998) and currently supports the alignment of local curricula in all 66 Louisiana school systems. The State is also moving aggressively to complete the initial design and implementation of a comprehensive school and district accountability system. (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1998, p. 6)

The rest of the examples provided in the report offer a similar story. Standards are set at the state-level and districts compete for federal funding allocated by the state according to those standards. Success (greater allocation of funding) is measured by scores on statewide standardized tests given to students in school. Scores are aggregated by school and indicate the success or failure to adhere to the particular state's standards. Schools and districts, in this model, are accountable to the state for their students' performance on these tests and in competition with one another in securing federal funding.[4]

At this point in educational policy, however, the only punitive measures taken were mandated by the state and varied accordingly. To put it from a neoliberal standpoint, competition between schools still did not have any teeth because the rules were different for each state. Should a school continually fail the tests required by Goals 2000, the federal government had no control over what would happen to that school. Enter George W. Bush and the era of No Child Left Behind.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 brings into relief the neoliberal ideology that shapes educational policy and introduces a system of school evaluation that persists in the current Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. A reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), NCLB attaches an emphasis on competition in the free market familiar to previous educational reform efforts and policy since the *A Nation at Risk* report. Different, however, from its predecessors

[4] This does not take into account the glaring differences between states' distribution of federal funding. To give some idea of the disparity between states, the 1998 report gives a breakdown of funding distribution. At the lowest end, fourteen states allocated $10K-30,999K to their local districts while, at the highest, three states allocated $200K plus (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1998, p. 15).

outlined above, NCLB brings schools into the competitive market to the tune of federally imposed sanctions.

Similar to Goals 2000, NCLB measures the success of a school through students' standardized test scores. Each school is required to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which is determined at the state level according to state standards. Should a school fail to meet AYP, a series of annual cumulative sanctions defined by NCLB are implemented. This process proceeds as follows. The first year a school fails to meet AYP, it is placed on "needs improvement" status. This is a warning status in which no sanctions are pursued against the school. If the school fails to meet AYP a second consecutive year, students are given the option to leave that public school for another public school in their district that is meeting AYP standards. After failing to meet AYP for three consecutive years, students may still leave their public school for another, and the "needs improvement" school must open its doors to supplementary educational service providers (SES). SESs are often private companies who offer tutoring services. The use of private companies in public schools is arguably a major victory of the market from a neoliberal viewpoint. The claim can now be made that the use of private companies to do what public schools have failed at justifies the market's involvement in public schools. As well, the SESs are not accountable for the students' test scores, the schools are. If a school fails to meet AYP for a fourth consecutive year, all the previous sanctions carry over, and the school additionally must take "corrective actions" which includes the replacement of staff and changing of curriculum. Teachers and administrators are, at this stage, in danger of losing their jobs because of students' test scores. Regardless of all the factors that contribute to the ability of students to perform well on standardized tests, not the least of which is their life outside of school, and inconsiderate of the implementation of the standards themselves, teachers and administrators are held accountable for AYP at this stage. The general reasoning, from a neoliberal standpoint, is that if the worker cannot perform sufficiently, they cannot compete successfully in the free market. More specifically, in the free market of school employment, if school teachers and administrators cannot make their students score well on tests, they are not successful; ergo they should be fired. While this may sound extreme, the full sanction of not meeting AYP does not come into effect until the following, fifth year.

If a school remains in "needs improvement" status for five consecutive years, the district must initiate "restructuring" the school. Restructuring includes reopening as a charter school, replacing most or all of school staff or handing the school over to a private education provider. The restructuring, while mandated by NCLB, is implemented by the district. Because of this, different districts take different approaches to restructuring,[5] but common to them all is the initial closing of the school because of its inability to meet AYP. According to Sara Mead (2007), "in the 2005–06 school year—the fourth year since passage of NCLB—there were some 1,750 schools in 42 states in NCLB restructuring." While Mead discusses the fact that most schools undergoing restructuring have done little to change, the introduction of a national educational reform policy that mandates a school be "restructured" for not "measuring up" is a new phenomenon and expresses a different way of conceiving public schooling.

This new way of regarding public schools as competitive enterprises that remain open through successfully meeting the quantifiable outcome of meeting AYP, I argue, is the great success of neoliberalism in public education, especially as schools remain under threat of closure due to academic performance to this day. As an ideology, neoliberalism has shaped education in such a way that self-interest determines the structural trajectory of educational policy. Federal policy, specifically and continually, utilizes the market metaphor when addressing public education, further reinscribing public schools into that very market. If we extend the free market metaphor, public schools can be conceived as factories which produce citizen-workers for a globally competitive marketplace. Those employed by

[5] For example, see Kenneth Saltman's *The Edison Schools* (2005), which examines the private takeover of public schools, and the ideological ramifications the privatization of a public school system involves. The author writes specifically of the failed attempts by Edison Schools, Inc. to manage twenty public schools in Philadelphia, PA according to free market principles.

the schools are responsible for the production of these worker-citizens. Because quality is measurable through test scores, poor quality products (students) are the result of poor workers (teachers and administrators). Due to the rule of the free market, those factories that produce poor products will go out of business in a number of market-related ways. The owners of the product (parents of students) may choose to utilize a different factory within two years of faulty production (not meeting AYP). In three years, a factory can be brought under new management, and in five years, the factory can be liquidated and taken over by other entities such as the state or private companies.

This is a disturbing metaphor for anyone who is hesitant to unleash the free market on all public institutions. And those who encourage the link between education and the free market as an axiom of common sense often overlook the problems that such a link presents. When federal policy conceives of public schooling as a part of free market competition, privatization and corporate sponsorship become logical corollaries to the economy of schooling. Scholars from diverse fields of education have reacted critically to the implementation of neoliberal policy, particularly in the reauthorizations of ESEA (NCLB and currently the Every Student Succeeds Act). In the philosophy of education specifically, there is a turn to questioning what the "public" of public education means, with the aim of redefining public schools outside and critical of the dominant ideology embedded in current educational policy (see, e.g., Biesta & Säfström, 2023; Schutz & Sandy, 2015). It is with this recent focus of scholarship that I am concerned about in the next section. Particularly I inquire into the current use of Hannah Arendt's theory of the public in understanding the "public" of public education.

The Rise and Fall of the Arendtian Public

Arguably to establish an alternative to neoliberal policies of public schooling, there is a growing popularity in the philosophy of education to consider Arendt's notion of the public and its meaning for public schools (see, e.g., Kloeg, 2022; Meredith, 2021; Mihăilă & Lăzăroiu, 2020). I argue that, due to the narrative of decline Arendt fashions in order to bring about the social realm, using Arendt's public for public schools proves problematic beyond the mere cautionary note. In other words, to use Arendt's theory of the public for public schools overlooks the decline from public to social that Arendt establishes. In fact, embedding public schools in Arendt's public arguably brings about the demise of public schooling in favor of "social schooling," so to speak.

I begin with the public as established in *The Human Condition* (*HC*; Arendt, 1958/1998). Arendt presents her readers a narrative. Her goal is to locate a public in history and retell the story of its construction and demise in a manner that reveals consequences for modernity. While there is a tendency in her language to laud the past accomplishments of ancient Greek and Roman culture, importantly, she stops short of suggesting that moderns attempt to replicate the public of old. Instead, she critiques modernity through the category of society and highlights the replacement therein of action and agonism with behavior and conformism.

Neatly stated, for Arendt, the public and private distinction of antiquity falls along the lines of political and household, respectively. In associating the public and the political, the author turns to the ancient *polis* of Greece. Here she locates an arena in which men engaged with one another competitively, each man seeking glory over and above the other. In so doing, men were asserting their freedom defined as being neither ruled by nor ruling another. In the public realm, action emerged unfettered. Decisions that structured and restructured the polis were made here through speech and persuasion, rather than force and violence (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 26), illustrative of the political act par excellence.

Conversely, the household was the location of necessity, wherein the male head of the household ruled over wife, children, and slaves, and, as such, all members of the household were involved in the labor of survival, be it child rearing, field tilling, or resource providing. Arendt (1958/1998) approaches the private realm etymologically, as a realm deprived of others, in that, "[w]hatever he [private man] does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to

other people" (p. 58). With such close connections between the home and survival, the focus of the private was the sustaining and reproduction of the human species. Identity was lost within the private, where each member functioned as *animal laborans*, and with it went the glory, action, and freedom distinctive of the public realm.

These clear-cut categories of public and private dissolved with the arrival of the modern age. Arendt (1958/1998) reasons that the collapse of the public and private was due to "the rise of the social" (p. 38). By this she means the ancient private realm expanded out into the public realm through the increased role of the family outside of the household. The social realm arose out of the mapping of the family onto a people, e.g., a nation or state. She traces this development through the history of philosophy and finds Descartes's *cogito* as a pivotal point in the transition from a public to social realm. With the mind serving as the locus of all knowledge and being, a radical subjectivity draws people inwards.

The results of this conceptual move are important for how Arendt further complicates the public and private dichotomy via the social. Each individual is now limited by their own private interests and actions,[6] and, concomitant with this shift inward, the externalization of labor and consumption brings with it a distorted public. Arendt (1958/1998) stresses this shift when she writes, "the animal laborans was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open" (p. 134). If the individual's thoughts and feelings pervert the former private, then the relationships between alienated laborers takes the place of the former public. The rest of the world, public and private, shifts to relationships among isolated subjects, i.e. society. The social has rendered the public and private of antiquity almost unrecognizable. Arendt understands the social as a realm in which equality has come to mean interchangeable and faceless laborers producing and consuming in an unending cycle. She locates the public's death stroke by the social through the success of twin disciplines: economics and the social sciences. The rise of economics as a science both establishes self-interest as a law and assumes that self-interest is the common interest. This prescription for self-interest then provides, "the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as 'behavioral sciences,' aim to reduce man as a whole… to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal" (p. 45). In sum, with the advent and dominance of economics and the social sciences, society has fixated on behavior to be conformed, rather than action to be distinguished.

Given her genealogy of social science and critique of the social as something which has overrun the public, Arendt's work has been a popular topic for philosophers of education in the United States for several years. Aaron Schutz (2001) locates the beginnings of Arendt's popularity in educational research with Maxine Greene's 1982 Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association convention. Educational research addressing Arendt's work often focuses on her division between politics and education developed in *Between Past and Future* (*BPR*; Arendt, 1961/1977), using *HC* as a corollary to understanding the effects of such a distinction on public schools as public spaces (see Levinson, 2002; Wilson, 2005). In place of this focus, I concentrate on *HC* in examining the public of public schools. Such a focus centers on the following point: if Arendt's public obtains only in antiquity, the argument for public schools as Arendtian public spaces embeds such schools in a process of decline.

As mentioned above, recently, there has been a reappraisal of Arendt's work in theorizing the public and what it means for public education. Gert Biesta (2012), for instance, turns to Arendt's public as a "space where freedom can appear" in the form of a pedagogy engages actors and events in "becoming public." Absent from this re-introduction of Arendt's public into conceptualizing public pedagogy are the historical details and conceptual collapse of the public into the social. The "space" that Arendt's (1958/1998) public draws from, Ancient Greece, was constructed as a public specifically for male Athenian citizenry to the exclusion of women and slaves, who comprised the private space (pp. 58-67). This is not to disagree with the main argument that Biesta presents, but instead to exemplify how

[6] Arendt (1958/1998) later addresses this as the modern Archimedean point from which we seek to isolate ourselves in order to think (lift) the world. (p. 257).

problems can arise when cutting Arendt's public out of the historical and philosophical context that supports its appearance.

Additionally, the public's transition into the social traced by Arendt can present problems for philosophers of education looking to convert schools into public places. Terri Wilson (2005), for example, argues that Arendt's "powerful analysis of the public realm represents a potential practical and theoretical resource for thinking through how schools are, or can become, public spaces" (p. 347). She follows, and continues through her article, with a note of caution in mapping Arendt's public directly onto public schools, but ultimately, she maintains Arendt can be useful methodologically in linking not only "'what' Arendt says about the public to schools [but also] 'how' Arendt develops her analysis" (p. 354).

The methodological use, according to Wilson (2005), follows three analytical approaches: historical, conceptual, and normative. The first approach, the historical, details the decline of the public of ancient Greece and Rome into the social of modernity. The second, the conceptual, also involves "the loss of the public," but as a way of understanding our experiences (p. 349). The third, the normative, renders the public as both something "to be seen and heard" and "the world itself" (pp. 348–349). Wilson focuses primarily on the normative dimension to Arendt's public and asks "what would Arendt make of the growing groups of diverse, low-income parents ... that have come to see their public schools as central sites of neighborhood investment, local politics, and slow, steady social change?" (p. 351). Implied in her question is that these groups may indeed constitute a public in the Arendtian sense, but she goes on to consider Arendt's separation of politics and education in her work *BPR* in order to better address what Arendt's response would be. Wilson concludes with a reason for turning to Arendt's public, in that she provides a counter-narrative of sorts to "the language and policy of privatization and consumer choice" found in contemporary public schools (p. 354). However, as pointed out by Boyles's (2005) brief response to Wilson's article, I wonder whether schools "are saddled with an Arendtian social that is divorced from an Arendtian public" (p. 357). In line with Boyles, who argues that "the very organizers and parent participants noted [by Wilson] could just as easily represent the Arendtian social realm" (p. 356), I wonder further to what extent an Arendtian public is helpful in overturning what its demise brings about, the Arendtian social. Or more historically, as Arendt traces the historical transition of the public to the social, an Arendtian public arising out of the social begat by the public inexplicably reverses the processes that Arendt so carefully develops.

I extend the conversation between Wilson and Boyles by outlining the difficulties presented by conceiving of public schools as public spaces in three ways. I am interested in taking up the question Wilson asks of Arendt, not to fashion a response from Arendt, but instead to problematize Arendt's public as a potential model for public schools. Given that Arendt's theorizing of the public deteriorates into the social, of which she is unabashedly critical, I am interested in how philosophers of education can theorize a public of public schools that leads away from Arendt's social rather than reproduces it. In light of this interest, I attempt to redirect questions regarding the use of an Arendtian public in public schools toward a Habermasian public in the following way. First, I address the ways in which Hannah Arendt's theory of the public, as established in *HC*, is a narrative of decline, leaving her readers with a fallen public and a flourishing social realm. Second, I will argue for a shift in focus from Arendt's fall of the public to Jürgen Habermas's transformation of the public sphere (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [*ST*]; 1962/1989). What this move offers educational researchers and philosophers interested in the public of public schools is a dialectical model of the public different from a theory of the public-past to the extent that it becomes a discourse of opposition, rather than a narrative of decline.

In order to locate my reading of Arendt initially, I turn to Jeff Weintraub's (1997) distinction between the public and private. Weintraub's theme is to examine the "grand dichotomy" of public and private from a theoretical and political standpoint. He approaches the distinction as protean rather than a more static division of the terms. Because of the dichotomy's shiftiness, the discourses surrounding the distinction "cover a variety of subjects that are analytically distinct and, at the same time, subtly—often confusingly—overlapping and intertwined" (Weintraub, 1997, p. 3). Given this caveat, he distinguishes

between four frameworks for distinguishing public and private, one of which, the "republican-virtue approach" (p. 12), Arendt's theory resembles. This viewpoint focuses on political community and citizenship, both of which are "analytically distinct" from the market and the administrative state of what Weintraub terms a liberal-economistic framework. Here "action" takes a central role. The act of both citizenship and political community is participation. Weintraub places Arendt, along with others who look to classical antiquity for their conception of public/private, squarely in this category. There are two concepts of the public realm drawn upon in this model: the self-governing polis (Greek) and the apparatus of sovereignty (Roman). The Roman public is defined in terms of the sovereign's rule that the private society bears as rights granted and guaranteed by the (public) sovereign. The Greek public, however, emphasizes the notion of politics as citizenship. Here we find a strong definition for this second framework in which each citizen is an active participant, via debate, discussion, etc., in constituting the public. The difficulty with such a model, however, is its authors' habit of locating this kind of public in a remote past and tracing its demise, as Arendt does. For Arendt, this means the public of antiquity eroded into the social realm of modernity. This raises problems concerning the present-day relevance of a public established on such practices as slavery and patriarchy, to name only two.

In agreement with Weintraub, I understand Arendt as detailing a story of decline regarding the public. Such decline precludes the public in public education from being formed in any contemporary setting. Specifically, Arendt's public belongs to Ancient Greece. What allows such a neat distinction between the public and the private is tied up in the historical and political context of Ancient Greece. Due to this, I question how much we can separate the historical context of an Arendtian public when arguing for its place in public schools currently. As well, I argue that, rather than suggesting educators take up Arendt's public for public school, *HC* is better suited to a critique of the social in our current educational milieu.

Importantly, Arendt's vituperation against the social is not an exercise in nostalgic amelioration. If we read it as such, i.e., that the remedy to the social is to establish the public of antiquity, then the consequences which held for the Greek public would hold for us as well. This would lead us to Boyles's (2005) conclusion that while offering a fascinating history of ancient Greek and Roman political life, her focus is archaic and "passé" (p. 357). In other words, an attempt at recuperation for such a public ends in a nostalgic reverie for times gone by. Instead, I suggest a better use of *HC* is to situate modernity as compared to the ancients. In such a comparison we can understand our milieu in a number of ways. For example, it provides context and grounding for discussion of the public rather than arguing for a public ex nihilo. As well it serves as the basis for criticism of the ascendancy of a neutral conception of economics and the social sciences that assume a neoliberal stance as described above.

Arendt locates a public in history and examines its construction and demise, which points up the consequences those situated in modernity face as a result. Nowhere in *HC* does Arendt suggest that we replicate that moment in history. Nor does she prescribe the public of old as an inoculation to the modern social realm. Reading Arendt in this manner, the relevance of her model of the social realm is both contextual and timely, given the success of standards, assessment, and accountability in current educational policy and reform efforts that urge conformity of behavior for both teachers and students. Recall, for instance, the normalizing role economics and the social sciences Arendt assigns to the social realm. In an educational policy climate where standardized test scores indicate the measure and the means of success, criticality wanes in favor of adherence to standards. When those standards center on students as laborers in the globally competitive marketplace, and students are held to those standards for the duration of their compulsory public education, Arendt's social seems stronger now than when she wrote *HC*.

Arendt's ability to presage the rise of the social is arguably her great achievement, but just as great a difficulty arises when philosophers of education turn, in response to the neoliberal influence of educational policy, to reappropriate Arendt's public. If her social realm has in time become even more relevant in describing our current condition, then those seeking the public of public education are left

asking how far we have fallen. This question alone is problematic in its fatalism. I suggest we try asking a different question and, in order to do this, I argue for a dialectical theory of the public.

Habermas's Dialectic

The above argument urges a shift of focus when reading *HC*. Rather than appropriating Arendt's public to describe the public of public education, I argue that her social realm is pertinent to the task of critique when considering the neoliberal ideology underpinning education policy and reform that shapes public education. The question remains, then, as to how educators can conceive of a public in public schools, in contrast to a public as articulated by Arendt. To this end, I argue Jürgen Habermas's dissertation provides a heuristic that establishes a dialectical model of the public emphasizing the conflicts from which a public emerges, rather than a narrative of decline into which the public falls. I suggest a reconsideration of the public in public schools through Habermas's work, because the dialectical model he offers structurally requires a place for critical engagement, whereas Arendt's theory of the public declines into the realm of the social. The structural element of critical engagement offered by Habermas's public opens questions concerning the ways the public of public education is pre-formed in and by schools through current calls for standards, assessment, and accountability found in dominant policy discourses. As well, questions arise regarding how the citizen as a member of the public is constructed from a particular ideology and mapped onto students who enter public schools.

To draw a parallel between Habermas and Arendt, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1962/1989) is a retelling of Arendt's "Rise of the Social" (*The Human Condition*; Arendt, 1958/1998).[7] However, where Arendt depicts the shift as an expansion of the private household subsuming the public realm, Habermas addresses the shift more generally as the transition between idea and ideology. After tracing the long shift from the idea of the bourgeois public sphere to the ideology of civil society[8] through the works of Immanuel Kant, Georg W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Alexis de Toqueville, and John Stuart Mill, Habermas (1962/1989) states, "with the growth of a market economy arose the sphere of the 'social,' which broke the fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested with state authority" (p. 141). Through this new kind of social, the state's administrative role made the bourgeois public sphere requiring the separation of society and state a thing of the past. The state and society were linked inextricably so that the bourgeois distinction between public and private "could not be usefully applied" (p. 142). Instead, the private sphere took on new duties which at once housed commodity exchange and the state's authority in the form of guaranteed universal access to the market. As a result of the introduction of state authority into the market, those who were "economically weaker" sought "political means against those who were stronger by reason of their position in the market" (p. 145).

As a theme, Habermas shows the ways in which philosophers considered and reconsidered the bourgeois public sphere. As the sphere expanded, the idea, as members of the bourgeois identified themselves with it, turned into ideology, as they identified others with it. Said differently, the shift from

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[7] Habermas (1962/1989) says as much in the beginning pages of *ST* where he mentions the shift of economic activity from the private household to the commodity market under public supervision as analogous to Arendt's rise of the social (ST, p. 19). Though beyond the scope of this paper, an argument can also be made that Habermas addresses Arendt's social in his story of the refeudalization of civil society (*ST*, pp. 231–232). An important caveat, however, should be mentioned here. Although Habermas ends *ST* with the refeudalization of civil society in a similar way to how Arendt ends her *HC* with the success of the social over the public, due to Habermas's dialectical model, the public is not rendered null by society, as Arendt's model of the public is by the social.

[8] Civil society for Habermas (1962/1989) is "the realm of commodity exchange and social labor governed by its own laws" (p. 3). It becomes an ideological apparatus at the point when "the identification of 'property owner' with 'human being as such'" (p. 88) establishes the admittance criteria for the public sphere.

idea to ideology for the bourgeois class marked the shift from a unifying claim for their group to a unifying claim for all of humanity, where humanity was understood as the bourgeois citizen. The initial idea was only maintainable by the bourgeois class because it reflected their identity in a set of unanswered demands. As the sphere extended to include others, the bourgeois, once they obtained the power to satisfy their demands, sought to maintain their position by working the idea of themselves into an ideology of humanity. In other words, once the bourgeois came into power, they did not want to lose that power. Other groups whose demands went unmet, such as the proletariat, became critical of the bourgeois' position. In turn, the bourgeois justified their position of power by using their idea of themselves as an ideology of humanity. With this shift, members of the proletariat were either inscribed by the bourgeois ideology, i.e. the proletarian wanted the things that would secure his/her role in the bourgeois public sphere, or they remained critical of the bourgeois class, i.e. members of the proletariat identified with their class and sought to secure public rights, e.g., unionization.

The history Habermas (1962/1989) posits at this point merits consideration in view of current institutions housing free market ideologues arguing for educational policies in support of vouchers, choice programs, and overall privatization of the public school system. Generally speaking, if Habermas is right, idea becomes ideology once the idea is applied to a group that is of a different type (read class, race, gender, etc.) than the progenitors of the idea, i.e. a particular group identifies itself as representative of the universal. In particular, the bourgeoisie transformed the idea of a liberal public sphere into an ideology of the civil society of humanity when those without the economic means of the bourgeois gained political access to the market (pp. 128–129). In so doing, the bourgeois were able to maintain their status, though not without contestation, because in their newly formed ideology, they represented themselves as the paragons of civil society. To redress Habermas's point in a more contemporary setting, there are parallels in the ways which neoliberal educational reforms seek to reproduce status quo norms, of which they are the shining example, in order to maintain their current positions of power and prestige. Consider, for example, the oft cited aphorism that test scores distribute according to the income and educational background of students' parents. [9] If promotion through the public school system is determined through test scores, and those test scores are a significant predictor of the socio-economic background to the test takers parents, it becomes important to question how the public school system prefigures the roles of students before they arrive and after they leave their institution, through graduation or otherwise. From a Habermasian stance, the critical point becomes one of uncovering and engaging the ideology of "human being as such" (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 88) that educational policy, research, and practice maintain through standards, assessments, and accountability. This is merely one example of how Habermas's theory finds its matter in public education. As well, the public to which public education refers takes on new meanings when viewed ideologically. If the individual, understood as an unencumbered participant of the free market, stands as the valued unit of the public, those who do not conform to that unit are ushered to the periphery of the public. In public education, standardized assessments are designed specifically for this purpose, to highlight non-conformity to standards. The dominant ideology underpinning standardization and assessment is successful to the degree that it establishes itself as neutral and humane. This is not to claim, however, that there is not resistance to such assessments, or in Habermas's terms, that the bourgeois public sphere exists unopposed. In fact, the existence of structural opposition to dominance is precisely the point in arguing for a dialectical model of the public.

From a Fallen to a Dialectical Public in Public Education

[9] See Alfie Kohn's *The Case Against Standardized Testing* (2000), which provides a review of studies associating income and education of parents to student test scores for the NAEP and SAT.

The heuristic Habermas establishes between idea and ideology can be mapped on to two public spheres,[10] and this, I argue, is why a Habermasian public for public education sets up a dialectical model that Arendt's lacks. Through the idea, a critical public sphere arises, and through ideology, a normative public sphere.[11] Habermas (1962/1989) establishes a dialectical process between these spheres and locates this dialectic historically in the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie over and against the aristocracy of early modern Europe. He writes succinctly, "they [the bourgeoisie] claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves [the aristocracy]" (p. 27). Yet, as a dialectical process, the critical public sphere, emptied of the bourgeois and filled with the proletariat, continues against the bourgeoisie once they secure a position of power and create an apologetic ideology of their own, i.e. the bourgeois citizen as the model of civil society described above. This heuristic of a critical and hegemonic public sphere standing in dialectical opposition to one another has implications for the public of public schools which provide structural grounds for criticality and adjustment that a narrative of decline does not offer.

For public schools, Habermas's *ST* presents a dialectical model which avoids the fall of the public told by Arendt. His model provides an argument for the establishment of structural elements within the public which work to guarantee the critical engagement with and revision of institutions which support that very public. The pertinent example for philosophers of education is public education. In a Habermasian sense, understanding the idea as disruptive to ideology, we can ask to what degree the structural elements of public schooling serve the normative or critical public sphere. If schools are predominantly institutions of the normative public sphere, then what critiques have arisen in response? And, perhaps more importantly, in what ways can such responses work together to challenge current preconceptions of the citizen fashioned by public schools in order to institutionalize the continual reconception, revision, and restructuring such a dialectical model demands?

The Stakes of the Public for Education and How Philosophy of Education Matters

Through Habermas, questions regarding the hegemonic public sphere surface as to the expectations set forth by its ideology regarding the construction of the citizen in civil society. What do we, who inquire into education, mean by citizenship education? How is the citizen preformed by the institution of public schooling in ways that mirror the dominant power holders in order to serve the particular interests of parents who are already inscribed in the hegemonic public? What ways do such interests prohibit the equality public schools allegedly seek to attain? While these questions certainly concern what Boyles asks regarding how public schools are "saddled" with the Arendtian social, there is a shift in register from a narrative of decline to a critical discourse of change. A dialectical framework of the public in public schools emphasizes the agonism within public schools rather than the resignation of such conflict to larger social forces of conformity. In view of words like democracy, citizenship, and public, meaning comes about through such dialectical interaction.

By offering the analysis of Arendt and Habermas above, we are left with theories of the public that hold consequences for what we call public. In the case of this paper, I have drawn attention to how the public of public education is neither a given nor is it an uncontested term. The two conceptualizations of

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[10] It is important to keep in mind that, while I mention two public spheres here, this is not dyadic, that is to say, there are people excluded from and necessary to this process. The critical public engages with the hegemonic public according to their respective demands, and those who do not share these demands remain unarticulated in this struggle. For further insight on the role of those who fall outside of this engagement and how they are necessary for this engagement to occur, see Condit (1994) and Laclau (2005).

[11] I name Habermas's public spheres as critical and normative to highlight the role that limits play in establishing a public. Due to other limits (of word count), I can offer only a brief rationale for how I am interpreting their dialectical interplay. While a normative public sphere works within accepted limits, a critical public sphere questions the limits in which a normative public sphere operates. Due to the dialectical provision of Habermas's public, the critical public sphere can turn into the normative and the normative can leverage critique against the critical as well.

the public sketched here are not polar opposites (recall the rise of the social that appears in both authors' works), but neither are they entirely compatible. Arendt's public remains genealogically oriented toward its demise in the social, whereas Habermas's public vacillates dialectically through the structural inclusion of, and resistance to, critique. Such conceptual arrangements are key to arguing for a public in public education if the word is to provide something more than a banal catch-all into which all programs of education can fit. Within the contemporary neoliberal configuration of public education in the U.S., we have witnessed the public becoming nearly synonymous with the free market, an identification that has a history briefly pointed to above. Critical responses to the collapse of one into the other are numerous, but when looking for a positive expression of what can be done differently from or in resistance to the neoliberalization of education, philosophy of education offers the conceptual heft to open the public in ways that are conducive to practices, theories, and policies of education. Philosophical arguments grapple with what makes a public. In the context of this paper, philosophy of education offers critical and conceptual tools to ask how public education and the free market repel one another or, differently, what skeletal efficiencies education is left with when shaven to the dimensions of the free market.

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