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# Citizenship Learning and Democratic Engagement: Political Capital Revisited

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to contribute to the debates on adult citizenship education, particularly regarding the connections between citizenship learning and the redistribution of political power.*

This paper attempts to contribute to the debates on adult citizenship education, particularly regarding the connections between citizenship learning and the redistribution of power to influence decision-making. In doing so, and drawing on Bourdieu's theory on the forms of capital, special attention is paid to the concept of political capital, in order to help to broaden the scope of citizenship education theory and research, and to guide its practice in an emancipatory direction. My interest for incorporating the notion of political capital into the debate on citizenship education is not merely scholarly-driven; it emerged from the concrete needs of my own empirical research about participatory democracy in municipal governance, and from the scarcity of appropriate conceptual tools that I found in the mainstream literature on citizenship education to explain and interpret my preliminary findings.

## **Citizenship Education and Democracy**

Citizenship education programs tend to focus almost exclusively on two dimensions: a) the general knowledge of the law, expressed most frequently in terms of constitutional rights and duties, and basic information about governing bodies, and b) the development of civic virtues (e.g. the adoption of moral-ethical principles like self-discipline, compassion, solidarity, civility, tolerance, respect, trustworthiness, social responsibility and the like). That these two ideas occupy center stage in citizenship education approaches is not surprising, because the mainstream literature on citizenship theory itself tends to understand citizenship as either personal status or as civic virtues. Critical citizenship education programs sometimes add a third dimension: the development of a critical consciousness. Some of these programs emphasize public dialogues about issues of interest or about public policy to foster a more enlightened

citizenship (e.g. the Canadian Citizens' Forum). Other programs (particularly those inspired by Habermas' ideal-speech situations or Freire's study circles) promote the development of a critical consciousness, understood as the cooperative search of truth (Habermas) or the unveiling of mechanisms of oppression (Freire). Important as they are, these programs tend to privilege the moments of enlightenment and deliberation (and sometimes mobilization) over the moment of democratic decision-making.

In sum, citizenship education programs focusing on the provision of general information about the law, the nurturing of civic virtues and the development of enlightened citizens certainly contribute to promote a more democratic culture<sup>1</sup> and are of foremost significance in any democratic society. However, they constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the realization of a truly democratic citizenship, because they do not sufficiently emphasize the nurturing of a consistent engagement in the political process, are not usually connected to the development of policies and practices of participatory democracy, and do not pay enough attention to informal democratic learning. Furthermore, there is one dimension that has generally been neglected by mainstream citizenship education theory and practice: they do not pay enough attention to issues of power, which limits their possibility to contribute substantially to the equalization of the political world.<sup>2</sup> If citizenship education implies the double capacity to critically understand social reality and to influence political decisions, bringing back the concept of political capital into the discussion has the potential to illuminate the connections between democratic learning and actual governance.

## **The Forms of Capital:**

### **The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu**

Pierre Bourdieu, a French Sociologist, in “The Forms of Capital,” an influential article published in English in 1986 (originally published in German in 1983), examined the mechanisms of accumulation and conversion of capital. Bourdieu (1986: 241) understands capital as accumulated labor (in its materialized form or in its embodied form) which, “when appropriated on a private (i.e., exclusive) basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.” Bourdieu notes that capital, either in its materialized or embodied form, has a potential capacity to produce profits. Although it takes time to accumulate, it is likely to reproduce and expand. Influenced by Weber and Marx, Bourdieu conceptualizes capital as a force inscribed in the objectivity of things and to the distribution of power in the social world, in the sense that not everything is equally possible or impossible. In this work, Bourdieu identified three forms of capital: economic, cultural and social.

In 1981, two years before the original publication of “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu published another article entitled “Political Representation: Elements for a theory of the political field” (originally published in French in 1981 and translated into English a decade later). Interestingly enough, in this article Bourdieu refers recurrently to a form of capital that is not even mentioned in “The Forms of Capital,” namely political capital.

In “Political Representation,” Bourdieu sets out to examine the social mechanisms producing and reproducing the gap between “active” and “passive” political agents, which he links to two factors: the distribution of capital (particularly cultural capital) and the division of political labor. Regarding the first factor, Bourdieu contends that

The concentration of political capital in the hands of a small number of people is something that is prevented with greater difficulty – and thus more likely to happen – the more completely ordinary individuals are divested of the material and cultural instruments necessary for them to participate actively in politics, that is, above all, leisure time and cultural capital (p. 172).

Regarding the second factor, Bourdieu argues that politics has become a monopoly of professionals, and ordinary individuals, particularly those who “lack any social competence for politics and any of their own instruments of production of political discourse or acts” (173), have become consumers who devote loyalty to recognized brands and delegate power to their representatives, a phenomenon that he identifies especially in the left.

When, later in the article, Bourdieu elaborates on the concept of political capital, his two-fold diagnosis that ordinary citizens have been dispossessed of the political means of production (that is, the production of political discourses and actions) and that politics have been concentrated in the hands of professional politicians and bureaucrats, leads him to identify political capital only among political leaders or parties:

Political capital is a form of symbolic capital, credit founded on credence or belief and recognition or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it). (p. 192).

In this work, therefore, Bourdieu understands political capital as the political power enjoyed by politicians, a power that is derived from the trust (expressed in a form of credit) that a group of followers places in them. Then, it follows that whenever this trust increases or decreases, the political capital of a politician changes accordingly. In his own words,

This supremely free-flowing capital can be conserved only at the cost of unceasing work which is necessary both to accumulate credit and to avoid discredit: hence all the precautions, the silences and the disguises, imposed on public personalities, who are forever forced to stand, before the tribunal of public opinion. (p. 193)

Whereas the reasons for which Bourdieu abandoned the notion of political capital in “The Forms of Capital” are unclear, I suggest that it is a concept with enough descriptive and explanatory potential to be worth reconsidered. While it could be argued that perhaps political capital could be subsumed in one or

more of the three “main” forms of capital, I contend that political capital (as a distinct category) can assist us to apply Bourdieu’s analysis of capital to the specificities of the political realm.

### **Towards a Reconceptualization of Political Capital**

Bourdieu’s perspective on political capital, as an exclusive asset of leaders, politicians and parties who are credited (invested) with the trust of voters and supporters, falls in line with the usual definitions of this concept in political science. For instance, a current dictionary of political terms defines political capital as “the sum total of potential political influence that a *politician* builds up, by doing favors to others, supporting another lawmaker on a key issue, etc., so that when the time comes he (sic) can draw on this reservoir of capital, because others will be indebted to him” (emphasis is mine).<sup>3</sup> Political analysts also tend to refer to political capital as the degree of popularity (measured usually through opinion polls or votes) enjoyed by professional politicians and leaders. Politicians themselves refer to political capital when, for instance, they compare their capacity to mobilize people with competing leaders. What these conceptualizations of the term have in common is that they do not recognize the possibility that political capital could exist beyond the circle of professional politicians. By confining political capital to professional politicians, what these conceptions are doing is to legitimize as “common sense” (in the Gramscian sense) an arbitrary division between a selected group of active political actors, and a massive group of passive supporters whose only political role is to grant or withdraw trust to the former. Conceived in these terms (following Lippman rather than Dewey), the concept of political capital is of limited use to adult educators who are interested in promoting active and creative citizenship.

From an emancipatory adult citizenship education perspective, what is needed is an alternative conceptualization of political capital that puts more emphasis on human agency, on the possibilities of redistributing power in society, and on the potential role that adult education, social movements and public policies can play to democratize political life and empower those who are politically marginalized. From this perspective, I understand “political capital” as the capacity to influence political decisions. This is a capacity (actualized or potential) that all

citizens (not only politicians) have to a lesser or larger extent. This definition is relatively clear, but still remains at the high level of abstraction, because the political field has no clear delimitations. As feminists point out, “the personal is political.” Thus, it is possible to claim that “political decisions” include big as well as small decisions that are taken everyday in a great variety of public and private arenas (e.g. the parliament, the household, city hall, a court room, the workplace, schools, a supermarket, etc.). To be helpful and relevant to researchers and adult educators, I suggest that the concept of political capital has to be contextualized. In the context of my research, I am using “political capital” as the capacity to influence public policy at the municipal level. More specifically, I am applying it to better understand the connections between learning and power regarding deliberation and decision-making in local experiments of participatory democracy. I assume, as a given, the existence of a liberal democracy which ensures the same formal rights to all citizens, and a municipal government with a declared intention to engage ordinary people in decision-making process. The case I have in mind when I think about these issues is the participatory budget (PB) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, an experiment that started in 1989 when the Worker’s Party was elected for the municipal government.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Dimensions of Political Capital**

If political capital is understood as the power to influence public policy, and if one of the goals of an emancipatory citizenship education is to equalize the opportunities to influence government decision making, two related questions arise: a) what are the factors that enhance or inhibit that capacity? and b) why do some people have more political capital than others? The answers are not easy, because the development and activation of political capital encompass a broad variety of interplaying factors, and because the factors at play and the way in which they interplay vary from context to context. While the list of factors is probably endless, I would like to draw attention to certain factors, in light of their relevance for citizenship learning and for public policies aiming at promoting a more genuine democratic participation. Drawing from the literature and on my own research on participatory democracy, I organize these factors in five dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, closeness to power, and resources.

### 1. Knowledge

The cognitive area refers to both factual and procedural knowledge needed to participate effectively in the political process. Factual knowledge ranges from general information about the working of liberal democratic societies (such as electoral processes, separation of powers, etc.), to knowledge about legislation (e.g. the national constitution, rights and duties of citizens, provincial and local laws, relevant legislation about the issue at stake, etc.), to “research-based” knowledge about a particular policy issue (e.g. smoking, access to guns, public transportation, child care, homelessness, etc.). Procedural knowledge refers to the specific understanding of the “rules of the game” of the process (e.g., Roberts’ rules of order) but also less open and transparent types of knowledge, such as a subtle understanding of the mechanisms to influence politicians. It could be knowledge about lobbying, campaign organizing, public relations, opinion polls and how to use the media, or even who to call or write to in order to request or demand something. All other conditions being equal (that is, even if people enjoy a similar legal or social status), a person or a group more familiar with this type of knowledge is likely to have an advantage to influence the political process over other individuals and groups.

### 2. Political skills

Knowledge about the political process is not enough to influence a political decision, if it is not complemented with a variety of skills. For instance, it is not too useful to know which is the most appropriate newspaper to write a letter to, if the person or group does not have the skills to write a compelling, persuasive letter. Likewise, knowing the procedural rules of an assembly is not enough if the person has not developed the skills to speak in public. The skills that individuals can develop in order to be more capable of influencing the political process, are many and they vary from context to context. They range from basic literacy and numeracy necessary to the understanding of legal documents and complex statistics, to critical analytical skills needed to comprehend, interpret and make a judgment on social issues. There are also more instrumental skills needed to participate in political processes, like the ability to speak in public, to argue, to persuade, to deliberate, to negotiate, to forge alliances, to build

support for a cause, to organize a collective process, etc. Most of these skills are learned in action, and improved with regular practice.

### 3. Attitudes

This area refers to those psychological traits that influence and sustain the participation of individuals and groups in the political process. This includes traits such as self-esteem, motivation, extroversion, endurance to accept defeat, persistence, patience, interest in political matters, inclination to participate in the political process and trust in the political system. It also includes the belief in one’s capacity to influence the system. In political science, this is conceptualized as “political efficacy,” and encompasses two dimensions: internal efficacy, which refers to the belief that citizens can affect government policy making, and external efficacy, which refers to the beliefs about the political system’s responsiveness to the will and actions of citizens (Berry et al. 1993). This distinction is important, because one’s confidence in influencing public policy is highly contextual, and depends of the characteristics of the system. In the case of Porto Alegre, the “demonstration effect” showed non-participants that participation of ordinary people like them in the PB generated beneficial results, and taught many participants that it was worth to participate again.

### 4. Closeness to power

This refers to the distance (both objective and symbolic) between the citizen and the centers of political power. An important element in the citizen’s distance to power is knowing professional politicians and elected representatives, and/or having developed a relationship with them. In this sense, the notion of “closeness to power” resembles what Nie et al. (1996) call “social network centrality.” The concept can also be understood as a “conversion” of Bourdieu’s concept of “social capital” to the specificity of politics. While it certainly relates to those two concepts, “closeness to power” goes beyond the notion of personal networks in three ways. First, because in this framework citizens’ distance to political power is conceived also as a two-way street that includes both citizens’ connections and government policies. In other words, it assumes that the distance between citizens and policy-making depends both on the personal political networks of the citizens, but also on government policies that pro-

mote citizens' participation in decision-making.<sup>5</sup> This leads to the second aspect in which "distance to power" is more than personal connections: "distance to power" can be observed not only in the possibility of participating in meaningful decision-making processes (via institutional reforms), but also in the actual process of participation. The experience of Porto Alegre's PB, for instance, drastically closes the gap between the ordinary citizen and the decision-making powers. But there is a third way in which the concept of "distance to power" goes beyond the idea of networks. As suggested above, it includes that objective dimension (the number of politicians a person may know, and the nature of the relationship with them) but also a symbolic dimension. The symbolic distance to power refers to the presence of people who share similar identities in positions of power, who can act as role models and inspiration. This occurs, for instance, when illiterates, women, black and poor are elected as delegates of the PB.

#### 5. Personal resources

Last but not least, the capacity of citizens to influence political decision-making is also determined by the amount of resources (especially time and financial capital) that a person or a group can devote to the political process. Regarding time, class and gender play a role. People who work extensive hours and spend a long time on public transportation commuting from home to work and back, and return home exhausted after being away all day, are probably going to be somewhat reluctant to spend an evening participating in political activities. They may prefer to share time with the family, have an enjoyable dinner, watch TV or just go to bed to replenish energies. Not by chance, in many experiences of participatory democracy there is an overrepresentation of men, seniors, retired people and middle classes. Money can also be mobilized to influence the political process, ranging from illegal practices such as buying votes among elected politicians (bribery) and other forms of corruption, to legal practices such as hiring lobbyists, journalists or researchers, buying space in the media or launching monumental electoral or other type of campaigns. Certain activations of money into political influences (e.g. an advertisement or a bribery) can be interpreted, in Bourdieu's language, as a quick conversion of economic capital into political capital, or even

simply as an exchange of money for a service or a favor. However, economic capital or availability of time are not always directly correlated with political participation or influence. Financial capital per se does not constitute political capital unless it is activated (or converted) to influence the political process.

#### Political Capital in Context

As already pointed out, while I recognize that more dimensions could be added in order to operationalize the concept of political capital, I chose these five in terms of their relevance for education and public policy. These dimensions should not be considered in either a static way, or as isolated from each other. On the one hand, I understand political capital as a dynamic concept, because the capacity that a person or a group has to influence political decisions may vary over time, and could be very different from context to context or, using Bourdieu's terminology, from field to field. On the other hand, these dimensions are related to each other in the sense that, due to the interrelated nature of unequal social relations, it is plausible to suggest that citizens who have above average capacity in one dimension (let's say, knowledge about the political process), are more likely to have above average capacity in other dimensions (e.g. confidence about their possibilities to influence the political process, or skills to participate in the process). Moreover, due to the multiple mechanisms of "conversion," those with high political capital are likely to have also high levels of other forms of capital (economic, social and cultural). In this regard, the discussion on the unequal distribution of political capital must be put into the context of broader structures of domination and interlocking oppressions, and cannot ignore the role that class, gender, race and other inequalities play in the acquisition and activation of political capital.

It is also pertinent to point out that the five dimensions of political capital described above can be identified at the individual level, and also at the collective level. In the same sense that one person can have more or less political capital than other, a group (a communal association, a social movement, a school council, a union, etc.) can also have more political capital than other groups. Political capital can be activated on individual basis, but also through participation in collective action. Obviously, when individuals join a collective entity in order to advance

their concerns and interests, their personal political capital increases significantly both in quantitative and qualitative terms. This is not only because of the power of numbers, but also because the political capital of a group could be interpreted as more than just the sum of the political capital of its members, as it also includes factors such as cohesion, level of organization, history, etc.

The concept of political capital can be helpful for those interested in an emancipatory citizenship education that attempts to go beyond the traditional focus on legal knowledge, civic virtues or enlightenment. In this sense, the concept of political capital brings the tradition of popular education into the citizenship education debate, and at the same time provides a necessary complement to the focus on “critical consciousness” usually present in popular education theory and practice. Indeed, as the previous discussion suggested, a person or a group with a high critical consciousness is not necessarily more capable of influencing the political process than another person or group with less critical consciousness. Although the process of conscientization à la Freire helps oppressed people to critically examine the causes of their oppression, it does not necessarily equip them with the tools and attitudes to influence the democratic process. As Belanger (1999) reminds us, the development of these competencies is one of the key prerequisites for the democratization of democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Political culture refers to the political orientation and attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and the attitudes toward the role of the self in the system. As we shall see, I distinguished this concept from the concept of political capital.

<sup>2</sup> The typical functionalist approach to citizenship education is based on the assumption that educational institutions are neutral and objective, and that they distribute civic virtues and civic knowledge in a relatively fair way. Following a line of reasoning similar to that of human capital theory, it examines the “democratic rates of return” of educational investments (higher rates of voting, tolerant attitudes, etc.) but it tends to overlook the ways in which educational institutions contribute to reproduce the inequalities of the social structure.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [www.fast-times.com/political/political.html](http://www.fast-times.com/political/political.html) (accessed February 24, 2000 11:00 am).

<sup>4</sup> Since then, and largely due to the success of the participatory budget, the Workers’ Party has been re-elected

twice for the municipal government, and recently won the elections for the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

It is important to note, however, in order to avoid an excessive voluntarism, that an emancipatory citizenship education cannot, alone, equalize economic and social opportunities, in the sense of redistributing economic wealth or reversing social polarization. Nevertheless, it can assist to further a democratic culture and to equalize political opportunities. Furthermore, when citizenship education is part of a larger project of participatory democracy and social justice, the redistribution of political capital can play a key role in the overall transformative project.

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twice for the municipal government, and recently won the elections for the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

<sup>5</sup> Berry et al. (1993) have shown that much of the distance citizens perceive between themselves and politics is rooted in the content of public policies.